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**Being reasonably moral**  
**Prichard and the mistake of moral philosophy**

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**Being reasonably moral:  
Prichard and the mistake of moral philosophy**

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at King's College,  
London

- 2014 -

## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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The question ‘Why ought we to do what we think we ought to do?’ was said by H. A. Prichard to be an improper question, manifesting erroneous presuppositions about the nature of moral reasoning. Moral rationalists think it a legitimate question, and they maintain that we are rationally justified in acting as we are morally obliged to act. Anti-rationalists deny this claim: specifically, they deny that acting in accord with moral obligation is endorsed by practical rationality. In my dissertation I try to uncover the source of disagreement amongst these three views. I then propose a resolution by appealing to my interpretation of Plato’s version of moral rationalism. I argue that contemporary moral rationalists and anti-rationalists in fact share the presupposition(s) that Prichard regarded as erroneous and which are not found in Plato. However, Prichard misread Plato as a rationalist of the instrumental persuasion and also offered only the beginnings of a positive view on the nature of practical reason. Therefore he failed to recognize that Plato gives a good positive answer to the original question on which the rationality of morality does not depend upon endorsement from any external source. Even so, Prichard’s limited remarks on the nature of moral deliberation show intimations of a better conception of the nature of moral rationality than is assumed in the contemporary debate between moral rationalists and anti-rationalists. One proponent of a more developed conception of the nature of moral thinking in the spirit of Plato is Iris Murdoch, and from her work I sketch a conception of the relation between thought, words and moral experience that in my view offers a way to understand the rationality of morality that is truer to the phenomena.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

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<b>MR</b>	Moral rationalism
<b>SMR</b>	Strong moral rationalism
<b>WMR</b>	Weak moral rationalism
<b>AR</b>	Anti-rationalism
<b>SAR</b>	Strong anti-rationalism
<b>WAR</b>	Weak anti-rationalism

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## CHAPTER 1 – H. A. PRICHARD AND THE MISTAKE

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### SUMMARY

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I aim in this dissertation to discuss whether moral requirements are requirements of rationality. This is the thesis known as moral rationalism. The opposing view, which denies that moral requirements are requirements of rationality, is known as anti-rationalism. It is well known that H. A. Prichard, who pre-dated the debate in its current form, said that the requirements of morality could not be demonstrated by argument. I shall address the debate about the rationality of morality by starting with an examination of Prichard's views, in the course of which I shall try to establish whether he could be said to be a moral rationalist or an anti-rationalist. That will require a close look at what is involved in both of those positions which will take up the next two chapters. In the fourth chapter I shall examine Prichard's arguments against one version of the rationalist position which he saw represented by Plato. That will place me in a position to assess Prichard in relation to the debate in the following chapter, and finally to put forward a positive view about the nature of moral rationality.

In brief, it is taken to be the case that a person must be on one side or the other because the two positions appear to exhaust the possibilities on the question of the rationality of morality.<sup>1</sup> Either morality is rationally underpinned, or it is not. I will attempt to steer a course through the tangled thicket of issues raised by tackling just those that are fairly immediately relevant to exploring how Prichard may be seen in relation to the current debate on this question and what the implications of his view may be for moral reasoning. In my view Prichard's dissatisfaction with moral philosophy, his arguments concerning what he saw as its mistake and his limited remarks about the nature of moral thinking express his sense of what turns out to be the possibility of a third way although, for reasons which become apparent, he himself did not develop a view on the rationality of morality. I will take a generous view of Prichard and say that I believe his views would have been hospitable to the thoughts of certain subsequent writers who take a different approach to the relation

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<sup>1</sup> If they are exhaustive, no other alternatives are possible. When I first encountered this topic I thought that was the case. In what follows I show that it is not, and that Prichard's view on the impossibility of justifying morality by argument sits uncomfortably with either side of the debate so conceived, because his assumptions are incompatible with theirs, and in drawing out his assumptions a third position can be seen.

between rationality and morality and I will sketch the view of a representative of that approach.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter I set out the respective positions in broad outline and ask which side Prichard could be said to take. I expound Prichard's arguments for his claim that moral philosophy rests on a mistake, and his rudimentary positive view on the nature of moral reasoning. I suggest reasons why Prichard may or may not be said to espouse one or other of the positions in question, in preparation for examining those positions in more detail in the next chapters.

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<sup>2</sup> This I do in the last chapter.

## 1. INTRODUCTION: THE ISSUE – MORAL RATIONALISM, ANTI-RATIONALISM AND THE NATURE OF MORAL RATIONALITY

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Moral rationalists maintain that moral requirements are rational requirements. Taken by itself the claim may seem uncontroversial, but proponents of the view mean something quite specific by it. They mean that moral requirements are always rationally endorsed, such that it is always rational to comply with moral reasons for action and always irrational not to do so. Anti-rationalists deny this; they hold that it can be rational not to comply with moral dictates, or even that reason has nothing to say about whether we ought to act morally or not – moral requirements are not rational requirements. The two differ on whether it is rational to act morally. H. A. Prichard pronounced that it was improper even to ask whether we ought to act morally and that moral philosophy was erroneously preoccupied with trying to vindicate morality by attempting to provide rational proof that we ought to act on its dictates. He denied that this could be done. Already, this way of framing the debate is controversial. There is no non-controversial way of framing it, since the varieties of opinion on both sides are such that any wordings will seem question-begging to some proponents. Since there are varieties of opinion on both sides and Prichard preceded the debate in its current form, placing him in relation to it must involve taking care not to assume he could or should have anticipated subsequent issues. I have deliberately worded Prichard's view to leave in the ambiguity between "ought morally" and "ought rationally" because he did not articulate this distinction. It is the purpose of this and ensuing chapters to identify these issues and explore the extent to which Prichard may be said to agree or disagree with any of the shades of view in the current debate.

## 2. WHY SHOULD WE DO WHAT WE THINK WE OUGHT?

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### 2.1. PRICHARD AND THE IMPROPER QUESTION

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In his famous paper, "Does Moral Philosophy Rest On a Mistake?"<sup>3</sup> Prichard claimed that moral philosophy consisted of mistaken attempts to answer an "improper question".<sup>4</sup> The question was 'why ought we to do what we think we morally ought to do?' He saw moral philosophers of the past as having been engaged in trying to give the reasons, that is, in

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<sup>3</sup> Hereinafter, "Mistake", originally published in *Mind*, Vol.21, No.81 (Jan 1912), 21-37; also in H. A. Prichard, *Moral Writings*, ed. Jim MacAdam (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2002), to which my page numbers refer.

<sup>4</sup> Prichard, *Moral Writings*, 7.

various ways to argue rationally to the conclusion that we ought to fulfil our obligations. This was a misconceived enterprise, he thought, because it cannot be successfully argued that we ought to act morally – attempts had failed, and they had failed because they had misunderstood the nature of morality. That existing proofs fail, if they do, does not entail that proof is impossible; that knowledge without proof exists, if it does, does not entail that proof cannot be found. This in itself raises the question at the heart of the matter: what is it to argue rationally, and specifically, to give rational support to a moral view, even more specifically, to acting morally? This is the question Prichard did not pursue, although I will suggest it was Prichard's implicit view that there were principled reasons for the lack of proof. In his view, that we have moral obligations, what they are, and that we ought to fulfil them, are self-evident to us, and “absolutely underivative or immediate.”<sup>5</sup> The awareness of these things is immediate in the sense that it is not derived from another source, especially a non-moral source, and not derived by a process of argument. We may arrive at recognition of these things as a result of moral thinking, but that kind of thinking is internal to morality and different from that rendered explicit in recognized forms of rational argument. He remarks, “we may not appreciate the obligation to give X a present, until we remember that he has done us an act of kindness. But, given that by a process which is, of course, merely a process of general and not of moral thinking we come to recognize that the proposed act is one by which we shall originate A in a relation B, then we appreciate the obligation immediately or directly, the appreciation being an activity of moral thinking.”<sup>6</sup> The nature of thinking in moral matters is critical in connection with the rationality of acting morally, and it is because of this and similar remarks of Prichard's that I maintain that he was aware, if only inchoately, of its central importance to a proper understanding of moral rationality, although he did not develop his conception of moral rationality. I shall look at where he might have gone if he had in my last chapter.

Prichard observes that we are likely to become doubtful about the significance of an obligation when we feel it to be in conflict with what we want to do: “Any one who, stimulated by education, has come to feel the force of the various obligations in life, at some time or other comes to feel the irksomeness of carrying them out, and to recognize the sacrifice of interest involved.”<sup>7</sup> He puts the improper question we are prompted in these circumstances to ask, and which he sees moral philosophy as having sought to answer, this way: “Is there really a reason why I should act in the ways in which hitherto I have thought I ought to act? May I not have been all the time under an illusion in so thinking? Should not

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

I really be justified in simply trying to have a good time?”<sup>8</sup> Immediately he cites Plato’s Glaucon from the *Republic* as seeking proof to justify the feeling “that we ought to act in these ways”.<sup>9</sup> He says Glaucon “asks, ‘Why should I do these things?’” and he comments: “and his and other people’s moral philosophizing is an attempt to supply the answer, i.e. to supply by a process of reflection a proof of the truth of what he and they have prior to reflection believed immediately or without proof.”<sup>10</sup>

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## 2.2. ‘WHY BE MORAL?’: DIFFERENT QUESTIONS

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The claim that we ought to do what we think we ought is multiply ambiguous. At least the following different questions can be distinguished:

- a) Moral scepticism can be doubt about the reality of morality – whether there is any such thing as moral obligation at all. As Prichard observed, the compelling nature of moral duty sometimes strikes us as a mysterious force, seeming to come from nowhere, and this thought gives rise to puzzlement as to whether there really is any basis at all to our feeling of compulsion. It is not difficult to imagine that it would be quite possible to get through life doing only what we want, never heeding that sense of compulsion which might be purely imaginary. Perhaps there really is nothing we have to do, and nothing we ought to do, but only things that we want to do or things that are better or worse as determined by reference to our preferences or sensibilities and to goals that creatures like us happen to have. This line of thought may lead to a suspicion that the correct explanation of “the feeling” to which Prichard refers, and with which we are familiar, may lie in psychology and related fields, for example as being simply a result of social conditioning, and that it has been misidentified as connecting us with some mysterious force we label ‘morality’, which idea should probably be consigned to the annals of history along with other unfounded ideas such as belief in God, the geocentric theory, the soul and the ether.
- b) Philosophers tend to distinguish from this a second question, about the authority of morality. It may be that one could accept the reality of morality, that there really are standards of behaviour, whatever their basis, and still ask why one ought to comply. That question is most likely to arise, as Prichard observed, when a conflict is felt between inclination and duty, prompting doubt about whether we really ought to comply

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

with a duty even if its reality is not in question. It is possible to ignore the call of duty, and to do so apparently with impunity. Whence then the force of the claim that one ought to comply? This is sometimes put as a question about how it is possible to justify the normativity of morality – its prescriptive rather than descriptive nature.

- c) A related but separable question is about what it is that constitutes a duty as a duty. What is it about certain actions that distinguishes them from other kinds of action and renders them obligatory while others are optional? Is there some feature that all duties bear and non-duties lack, such as their being derivable from a single principle, or producing consequences of a certain kind, or are duties just a disparate collection of actions with no unifying principle – an “unrelated chaos” as Prichard thought?<sup>11</sup>
- d) There is a further question which is about the content of morality. Why is it a duty to keep a promise, but not to keep a diary, why do we think people owe their benefactors gratitude and their friends loyalty, but don’t have to give them all their possessions; is there an obligation to create happiness indiscriminately or to pick up litter in one’s immediate vicinity? These are questions which accept the reality of morality and its authority but seek to establish what it demands of whom.

These issues are interdependent and Prichard’s paper touches on all of them. They are treated as separable, as we shall see, particularly in the current literature on moral rationalism. The second question, concerning the authority of morality, is the one Prichard has identified in his paper as central and problematic, and it is also the one that is to the fore in debates between moral rationalists and anti-rationalists. I want to discuss whether or to what extent it is really separable from the first and the third, and to a lesser extent the fourth. I shall argue that Prichard did not clearly separate all of these questions, particularly the first two, not because he failed to see important distinctions, but because his understanding of the nature of morality as “underivative” involved the view that to treat them separately involves a confusion.

In brief, Prichard thought that we see that we have a particular duty (d), say, to relieve someone’s distress, when in a particular situation we come to recognize how we stand in relation to another person. When we recognize that we are under a specific obligation, the right-making feature (c) of the action, the feature that renders it a duty, is not its relation to some other source that generates rightness but the intrinsic nature of the action itself, its

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.



being the agent's relieving the distress of someone to whom they stand in a certain relation. But to recognize the features that make an act a duty is to recognize why it is right to do it, which is to answer the second question (b), or to forestall it. Lastly, Prichard thought that the answer to (a), whether there really are obligations, also entailed the impropriety of asking (b), whether we ought to comply, because confronted by a situation in which we recognize ourselves to be under a particular obligation, the reality of morality as such could not be doubted. We at the same time see what morality requires, that it is required and why it is required. He denied that there were any further questions to answer which might require reference to a further domain of reasons capable of endorsing acting in accord with what is thus seen to be a duty. In what follows I shall discuss whether he failed to understand important distinctions or declined to make distinctions without difference, and how he would have answered those who claim that acting morally is or is not rationally required.

### 3. MORAL RATIONALISM AND ANTI-RATIONALISM: WHICH SIDE WAS PRICHARD ON?

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Moral rationalism answers the second question above, about the authority of morality, in a certain way. It does not just make what might seem the relatively uncontentious claim that it is rational to act morally, but interprets that as saying we ought to comply with morality because it is rational to do so, meaning by this that there is a separate domain of normative reasons which itself has the authority to endorse or prohibit moral actions. We encounter a problem, as Prichard observed, when reasons for action conflict. Sometimes morality enjoins action that conflicts with self-interest, and perhaps with other reasons.<sup>12</sup> Strong moral rationalism (SMR) answers the problem by arguing that in cases of conflict morality always rationally overrides other reasons. This is the doctrine of the rational supremacy of moral reasons – and that means that rationality, a domain of reasons separate from moral reasons, determines that moral reasons trump other sorts of reasons for action in cases of conflict. On this view, not complying with morality is therefore always irrational.

This approach makes morality, or rationality, appear to be very demanding – perhaps more demanding than some people think reasonable. It does not always seem to be irrational to act

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<sup>12</sup> Conflict cases are often described as cases of competing kinds of reason for action differentiated by content. The conflict typically discussed is between duty and prudence or self-interest, but other kinds of reason may also conflict, e.g. a business person may meet a conflict between the demands of economy, efficiency and quality; a theatre director may encounter a conflict between the requirements of art, taste, morality and finance. Thus the debate often represents the issue as a conflict amongst distinct normative domains – Prichard did not conceive of the issue in these terms.

contrary to morality, especially when morality asks much. Weak moral rationalists address this difficulty by modifying the view that it is always rational to act on moral reasons, whatever other reasons may come into consideration. Weak moral rationalism (WMR) proposes that in certain cases morality cannot demand that we comply; sometimes it makes sense to subordinate morality to other more pressing concerns. Only those moral considerations which are rationally judged more important than others can be compelling requirements to act. Thus, it will be rational to comply with moral requirements when they are the strongest amongst competing considerations but when a person has more reason to act otherwise morality does not demand compliance. Not complying with moral demands is always irrational, but not all moral considerations amount to demands, so it is possible both to act rationally and not comply with morality.

Anti-rationalism (AR) opposes these two positions. Classic moral anti-rationalism (which I shall refer to as strong anti-rationalism, SAR), usually taken to be exemplified by Hume, says that complying with morality is not a matter of reason, i.e. that rational argument cannot show that we ought to do what morality dictates. All reason can do is either inform us about what is the case or judge the validity of inference, but it cannot prescribe, still less justify, action. It can state that on the basis of experience this or that action is likely to bring about this or that state of affairs, and that people tend to respond in a certain way to these facts but it cannot tell us what we ought to do. The more recent representative of the view is Philippa Foot, who said, "The fact is that the man who rejects morality because he sees no reason to obey its rules can be convicted of villainy but not of inconsistency. Nor will his action necessarily be irrational."<sup>13</sup> A weaker version of anti-rationalism (WAR) allows that it can be rational to act morally but it can also be rational to contravene moral requirements. This view differs from WMR in that the latter says it is never rational to contravene moral requirements, while the former says that contravening moral requirements can sometimes be rationally justified, and if so, this is enough to refute moral rationalism without denying that reason plays any part in morality at all.

Which of these positions does Prichard take? He may at first seem to be an anti-rationalist, because he denied the possibility of proving by argument that we ought to fulfil our obligations. He might also have agreed with Foot that immorality is bad but not irrational, but would he have accepted the weak anti-rationalist claim that not meeting a moral demand

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<sup>13</sup> Philippa Foot, "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives", *Philosophical Review*, 81, No.3 (July 1972), 305. Strictly, she took this position in her earlier work and later modified her view as can be seen in, e.g. Philippa Foot, "Rationality and Goodness", *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, 54 (March 2004), 1-13.

can be rationally justified?<sup>14</sup> That seems to be a stronger claim, apparently legitimating immorality in a way that Foot's assertion does not, and I doubt he would have conceded it. In any case, his reasons, which I present below, for thinking that acting morally is not amenable to rational justification, surely apply to acting immorally too. On the other hand, as an intuitionist, he did think that we could *know* what we ought to do, and that we ought to do it, which anti-rationalists, broadly, deny. He did not think obligation exclusively a matter of an individual's possibly idiosyncratic emotional response to events they observe or experience and thus not within the province of knowledge, which is the view that tends to persuade people towards anti-rationalism. To say that our obligations are knowable is to say that there is a sense in which they are objective rather than subjective; that distinction causes many philosophical problems, and the notion of objectivity implies many things, but it is probably fair to say that anti-rationalists broadly speaking do not think of morality as objective.<sup>15</sup> He also thought of moral obligation as overriding, which many anti-rationalists deny and many rationalists assert. These considerations seem to pull him back towards moral rationalism. One reason for the appeal of moral rationalism is precisely the desire to show morality in some sense objective: if moral demands are rational then they are not arbitrary, they are not matters of taste, they are stable over time, there are explicit criteria by which to assess them and on which we can expect some measure of agreement, perhaps even across cultures, we can open the reasons for acting morally to inspection and thereby show the actions to be right or not. Prichard certainly thought moral obligation was knowable, yet denied that it is assessable by what are standardly accepted to be the resources of rationality. Moral rationalism does not quite seem to fit him either.

It is now time to take a closer look at what Prichard said, and then, in the next two chapters, to do the same for arguments for a strong and a weak version of moral rationalism, and the anti-rationalist alternatives, in order to identify the nature of the issues on which they differ and the implications of this for the rationality of morality.

#### 4. PRICHARD'S ARGUMENTS EXPOUNDED

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<sup>14</sup> Dorsey, D., "Weak Anti-rationalism and the demands of morality", *Nous* Vol.46, No.1 (2012), 9.

<sup>15</sup> The terms 'objective' and 'subjective' may be so laden with conflicting interpretations from different contexts as to have become useless. I suppose I'm not convinced of that: I'm hoping that my use of these terms here is sufficiently carefully explained as to achieve intelligibility adequate to my purpose. Moreover, I am at this juncture giving a broad characterization of the sorts of issues that divide the two sides. There are many shades of view on either side and I cannot address every nuance; it is possible there will be adherents of any position I address to whom my remarks do not apply.

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#### 4.1. TWO TYPES OF ANSWER TO THE IMPROPER QUESTION

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In “Mistake”, Prichard saw all arguments aimed at answering the improper question as falling into two types. For convenience I will label the first kind of answer prudential or instrumental, and Prichard sees the second kind as having two species that he identifies as respectively consequentialist and Kantian.

##### Type 1: The Agent’s Good

The first type of answer identified by Prichard, that I have labelled prudential, states “that we ought to do so and so, because, as we see when we fully apprehend the facts, doing so will be for our good, i.e. really, as I would rather say, for our advantage, or, better still, for our happiness”.<sup>16</sup> Essentially this answer offers prudential reasons for moral action, and thus in his view gives the wrong kind of answer. Prichard argues that to try to justify acting morally by reference to its profitableness, its conduciveness to personal advantage, benefit or happiness is to offer an inducement to moral action but not to provide a justification. It is just what we want to hear when prompted to question obligation by the inconvenience to ourselves of, for example, keeping our engagements, and, he says, “The answer is, of course, not an answer, for it fails to convince us that we ought to keep our engagements; even if successful on its own lines, it only makes us *want* to keep them.”<sup>17</sup> This strategy, he says, amounts to “the resolution of obligation into inclination” by presenting the obligatory action as a way to get what one wants, hence as desirable, and thus may render it likely people will do what they ought without explaining why they ought to. In the current terminology, it provides an explanatory or motivating reason for acting morally but not a justifying reason – it explains why some people sometimes act morally but not why they should.

##### Type 2: The Independent Good

The second type of answer states “that we ought to do so and so, because something realized either in or by the action is good.” This type of answer “bases the obligation to do something on the goodness either of something to which the act leads or of the act itself”, i.e. it claims that right actions produce good either (i) as an outcome distinguishable from the action itself, or (ii) intrinsically through realizing some good in the nature of the action itself. Prichard prefers this type of approach in either of its forms to the first one above because it does not appeal to the desires of an agent and thus avoids

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<sup>16</sup> Prichard, *Moral Writings*, 8.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

“the resolution of obligation into inclination”,<sup>18</sup> which is the error of the first type of answer. Rather, it appeals to a good conceived independently of desire or inclination and thus “refers to something impersonal and objective.”<sup>19</sup> However, according to him, to try to justify an obligation on the ground that doing so realizes some good fails to explain the nature of the link of obligatoriness between the person, the deed and the good expected to be produced by it which is indicated by saying a person ought to do it.

#### 4.1.1. PRICHARD’S OBJECTIONS TO TYPE 2, THE INDEPENDENT GOOD, FORM (I) GOOD AS AN OUTCOME

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Prichard identified this strategy, justifying an action by reference to the goodness of its outcome, with Utilitarianism, which he says “takes its stand upon the distinction between something which is not itself an action, but which can be produced by an action, and the action which will produce it, and contends that if something which is not an action is good, then we *ought* to undertake the action which will, directly or indirectly, originate it.”<sup>20</sup> He applies his argument equally to forms of “Utilitarianism in the generic sense”, or consequentialism in general, since it is about the production of good as an end, whatever the good is thought to be, whether pleasure, happiness, knowledge, friendship, the satisfaction of preferences, or any of the items identified as goods by different philosophers at different times.

Prichard made two objections to this version of the second type of answer.

##### a) It doesn’t follow

His first objection is that “this argument, if it is to restore the sense of obligation to act, must presuppose an intermediate link, viz. the further thesis that what is good ought to be ... An ‘ought,’ if it is to be derived at all, can only be derived from another ‘ought’.”<sup>21</sup>

The familiar point is that whatever things are thought to be good, there is no logical entailment from the actuality or possibility of any such good to the conclusion that it should be brought about or sustained in existence. That a good could be realized by a person’s acting in a certain way does not entail that they ought to act in that way.

Something is missing. To supply the lack by a premise containing another ‘ought’ may validate the inference at the cost of leaving obligation unexplained. To supply the lack by

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* This comment shows that he thinks that not just anything can be done just to produce good outcomes. Indirect consequentialism would be worse in this regard in his view, since it is at a further remove from assessing the individual action required in the circumstances, requiring rule-following regardless.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

a premise referring to a desire for the resulting good, he said, resolves this argument into an argument of the first type, and is subject to the same objection – namely that being informed that someone did what they wanted does not explain why they ought to have so acted.<sup>22</sup>

b) It doesn't correspond with our moral convictions

Secondly, without appealing to desire, the strategy of justifying action in terms of its production of good fails in his view not only to explain the nature of the obligation on the part of someone to so act, but also fails to correspond to our moral convictions. He suggests “we ask ourselves whether our sense that we ought to pay our debts or to tell the truth arises from our recognition that in doing so we should be originating something good, e.g. material comfort in A or true belief in B, i.e. suppose we ask ourselves whether it is this aspect of the action which leads to our recognition that we ought to do it. We at once and without hesitation answer ‘No’.”<sup>23</sup> When under an obligation we do not normally suppose ourselves to be obliged to produce the outcome but to do the deed. He suggests this can be seen clearly when the outcome is not expected to be good yet we feel no less obliged to do the deed, or when the outcome was not good but does not show that we did not after all do our duty in doing the deed.<sup>24</sup>

So a) and b) object that the fact that acknowledged goods could be brought about by certain actions does not itself explain why anybody ought to perform those actions. All it can do is render it intelligible that people will do so if they want those goods. Further, we do not in any case think we ought to do something because of the good it will produce, as evidenced by the fact that we feel no less obligated when the outcome of our action will not be good. Prichard suggests that “if we take as our illustration our sense that we ought to act justly as between two parties, we have, if possible, even less hesitation in giving a similar answer; for the balance of resulting good may be, and often is, not on the side of justice.”<sup>25</sup> Thus he dismisses the first branch of the second type of attempt to explain why we should act morally.

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>24</sup> An indirect consequentialist might agree that not every act of duty produces good, since a duty is established on the basis of its producing more good than harm overall if always followed by everyone. How that would be established is unclear, but Prichard would deny that ‘our convictions’ give any intimation to us of our having made such calculations, or of our blindly (not unconsciously) following a rule established at some other time by somebody else: he talks of general and moral thinking going on, through which we come to appreciate the nature of an action by attention to its particularities, and thus coming to see it as a duty.

<sup>25</sup> Prichard, *Moral Writings*, 10.

#### 4.1.2. PRICHARD'S OBJECTIONS TO TYPE 2, THE INDEPENDENT GOOD, FORM (II) INTRINSIC GOOD

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He identified the second version of the second type of answer, justifying an action by reference to its intrinsic goodness, with “Kant’s theory of the good will” and regarded it more favourably than the first form. He said it is “this form which has always made the most serious appeal; for the goodness of the act itself seems more closely related to the obligation to do it than that of its mere consequences or results, and therefore, if obligation is to be based on the goodness of something, it would seem that this goodness should be that of the act itself.”<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately this strategy “leads to precisely the dilemma which faces everyone who tries to solve the problem raised by Kant’s theory”.<sup>27</sup>

Prichard’s wording is less than perspicuous at this point, but the following is my attempt to render his argument faithfully. He has in mind as his target the attempt to justify acting in accord with duty in terms of the intrinsic goodness of the action. Kant of course said that the only unconditionally good thing is a good will, and he meant by it a will determined by the dictates of practical reason regardless of inclination. There seems to me to be some space between that view of Kant’s and what Prichard tells us about the view he is here addressing, that the rightness of an act is based on the goodness of the motive. Prichard does not fill that space by explicitly stating his line of thought so the following comments are my attempt to guess.

If what makes an action right is not the goodness of its outcome (this was the first form of this type of strategy, which he has rejected), the most obvious alternative would appear to be what philosophers have called ‘the intrinsic goodness of the action itself’. Perhaps an obvious way to understand what is meant by the intrinsic goodness of an action is that it has been done from a good motive, at any rate, this is how it has not uncommonly been taken and this might have been thought to be what was meant by acting from a good will.<sup>28</sup> We apply the term “intrinsically good”, Prichard notes, to actions of which we approve either because a person acts “because he thought he ought to do it” or because they are motivated by “a desire prompted by some good emotion, such as gratitude, affection, family feeling, or public spirit, the most prominent of such desires in books on Moral Philosophy being that ascribed to what is vaguely called benevolence.”<sup>29</sup> To cut short a convoluted and difficult

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>28</sup> That is how the ‘intrinsic goodness’ of an action has often been seen; and historically there has been this oscillation between ‘consequences’ and ‘intrinsic goodness’ as potential sources of justification of the rightness of moral action, and this is what Prichard refers to and rejects.

<sup>29</sup> Prichard, *Moral Writings*, 11.

passage in his paper, Prichard's objection to this approach appears to be that the rightness of an action cannot be explained in terms of the goodness of its motive, since this creates a need to justify the attribution of goodness to the motive, and that can only be done in terms of the rightness of the intended action, which has just been justified in terms of the goodness of the motive to do it – so the strategy involves a circularity, and we are left none the wiser about the justification for attributions of rightness or goodness.<sup>30</sup>

I could be very wrong but I take Prichard to be referring to the literature prompted by Kant's discussion of what gives an action moral worth, which Kant said was its having been done "from duty" as opposed to "from inclination".<sup>31</sup> Kant does not hold the view that the goodness of the motive confers rightness on an action, which may have been a possible interpretation debated in the literature and which Prichard rejects, but rather, he thought rightness independently ascertainable by putting proposed maxims of action to the rational test of universalizability. This would yield a verdict as to whether an action was morally permissible or required, and recognition of the moral status of the action would, in Kant's view, determine the will to act accordingly: a good will, then, must be one that is determined by recognition of reason's dictates as opposed to heteronomously, as he termed it, i.e. by inclination. Thus it would seem that for Kant the good is dependent on the right rather than the other way around. Prichard in fact holds this to be Kant's view, in spite of calling "Kantian" the view which puts the dependency in the reverse order, as is apparent when, in explaining his own positive view, he goes on to express his opposition to Kant, by saying, "it may seem that the view being ... put forward [his own] in opposition to the view that what is right is derived from what is good, must itself involve the opposite of this, viz. the Kantian position that what is good is based upon what is right, i.e. that an act, if it be good, is good because it is right. But this is not so."<sup>32</sup>

In labelling this view "Kantian" I suspect Prichard is, in his characteristically sweeping way, summarizing writers in deontological vein who maintained that what makes an action good is the goodness of its motive in order to avoid the difficulties associated with maintaining that action is justified by its consequences. What might make them Kantian may be no more than that they were not consequentialist, that they denied that rightness was dependent on goodness of outcome, and so tried to explicate rightness in terms of the notion of the

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<sup>30</sup> There is a less convoluted version of the same argument in his paper entitled "What is the Basis of Moral Obligation", Prichard, *Moral Writings*, 1-6, on p.3.

<sup>31</sup> *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, §4.398, in *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), 53.

<sup>32</sup> Prichard, *Moral Writings*, 30.



intrinsic goodness of the action, and took that to mean the goodness of the motive. It is less important for my purposes at this point to assess whether this view accurately interprets Kant, which I think it does not, or whether its exponents thought it did, or indeed whether Prichard thought it did, than to know what was Prichard's objection to this way of justifying acting morally, whoever might have espoused it.<sup>33</sup>

He diagnoses the wrongness of this view to be in locating the intrinsic rightness of an action in its motive, when "in reality the rightness or wrongness of an act has nothing to do with any question of motives at all."<sup>34</sup> The mistake "resolves the sense that I ought to do so and so, into the sense that I ought to be moved to do it in a particular way",<sup>35</sup> which is to say that it leads to the idea that our real obligation is not, or not only, to act in a certain way but to act in that way from a certain motive. This idea involves the "mistake similar to that involved in supposing that we can will to will",<sup>36</sup> namely that it displaces the obligatoriness from the deed to the motive. Acting from a worthy motive is an expression of virtue, but Prichard goes on to explain that he is claiming the complete separateness of virtue and morality (it is possible to do the right thing for the wrong reasons, and the wrong thing for the right reasons) and that "an obligation can no more be based on or derived from a virtue than a virtue can be derived from an obligation."<sup>37</sup>

In summary, Prichard's criticisms of both branches of the second strategy for justifying acting in accord with duty amount to the claim that any attempt to explain rightness in terms of the goodness of anything, whether of the act itself or of something that the action produces, is a mistake. He sees as Utilitarianism any attempt to justify the action in terms of a good external to the action, and as Kantian any attempt to justify the action in terms of its intrinsic goodness, and he rejects both strategies. On his understanding, moral rightness is *sui generis* and not explicable by reference to something else. Such justification as there is lies in the very nature of the action – that might be thought of as an "intrinsic" justification, but it is not in terms of the goodness of anything, and it is truly internal to the action rather than making reference to the motive, which is not itself the action so is not really "intrinsic"

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<sup>33</sup> Prichard does not name anyone who actually took this view either of Kant, or as a way of justifying moral action.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>36</sup> Prichard again does not attribute the view to anyone, but Hobbes argues against this mistake in *The Questions Concerning Liberty, Necessity and Chance, clearly stated and debated between Dr Bramhall, Bishop of Derry, and Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, London, 1656, in *British Philosophy: 1600-1900*, Vol.12, p.38, accessible via Past Masters Database, IntelLex Corp., Charlottesville, Va, USA (2000).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

to it: a kind of action can be done for a variety of motives. This will become clearer as we look at the other of the two types of strategy he identified, and then at his positive view.

#### 4.1.3. PRICHARD'S OBJECTIONS TO TYPE 1: THE AGENT'S GOOD

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The other type of strategy for justifying acting morally makes appeal to its bringing some benefit or advantage to the agent or to its conduciveness to the agent's happiness. Prichard argues that appeals to the agent's good give the wrong kind of reason to do what's right. Such appeals may make us want to act as happens to be right, but in doing so they reveal its being right as incidental to our acting, since in doing what we want, we act from inclination. That it benefits us, satisfies our desires or preferences or furthers our interests, and that we do it for that reason if we do, are irrelevant to the explanation of an action's being right even when what we do is right. In Prichard's view, the only thing that can be explained by reference to these factors is our motivation in acting. They explain why we do it but do not justify our doing it.<sup>38</sup> We do the right thing merely as a means to getting what we want, and our behaviour is explained in terms of taking what we see as the means to achieve what we want, while the rightness of the action remains unexplained. This explanation does not block the possibility that we would still so act if it were not right, unless its being right has an external connection to what we want. If that were the case, for example, if what we want is the esteem of our peers and the material rewards that may accompany that, and if our peers esteem those who act rightly, then we must do what is right in order to win their esteem which is what we want. But we lack an explanation of why these actions are right, and to say that some people think them right because they gain others' esteem would be circular.

This type of defence of acting rightly offers a prudential or instrumental reason to act morally. It is wrong in Prichard's view because it conflates a person's motivation in acting with the justification of the action, which is to say, it tries to reduce rightness to inclination, moral obligatoriness to non-moral facts. Thus both kinds of strategy that Prichard identified at the outset for answering the moral question in his view have failed. In connection with my original aim, to locate Prichard in relation to moral rationalism, it might be looking as though there is reason to identify him as an anti-rationalist. However, at this point Prichard goes on to state his positive view, and this throws light on his understanding of what it could be to be justified in acting morally.

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<sup>38</sup> In the contemporary debate distinctions are commonly drawn amongst kinds of reason according to function, as for example, explanatory, justifying (sometimes, normative), or motivating, in ways not done in Prichard's time. See for example Maria Alvarez, *Kinds of Reasons: An Essay in the Philosophy of Action* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010), ch.2. Joseph Raz, *From Normativity to Responsibility* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011), ch.2.

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#### 4.2. PRICHARD'S POSITIVE VIEW

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Prichard states his view succinctly, thus: “The sense of obligation to do, or of the rightness of, an action of a particular kind is absolutely underivative or immediate.”<sup>39</sup> It should be noted that here as elsewhere in his paper Prichard does not clearly distinguish the questions I identified at the start of the chapter. He purports to be addressing the question, “Why ought we to do what we think we ought?” yet it might seem that at some times he focuses on the matter of explaining the general nature of the moral ‘ought’, at other times on whether we ought to comply and sometimes on what makes an action right, and that here, in stating his position in this way, he is conflating these issues – or at least two of them: the sense that we have to do something, and what accounts for the moral rightness of what we feel obliged to do. Rather, though, he sees the immediate awareness of obligation as the immediate awareness at once of the rightness of acting in a particular way and of the obligation to so act; what he thinks we “immediately apprehend” in a moral situation is both what action we have to do and that we have to do it. He goes on, “The rightness of an action consists in its being the origination of something of a certain kind A in a situation of a certain kind, a situation consisting in a certain relation B of the agent to others or to his own nature.”<sup>40</sup> He means that an action is not made right by the independent goodness of anything, specifically of something other than the action itself (the outcome or the motive), as those he calls Utilitarians and Kantians suggest, or by the fact that benefit accrues to the agent; an action is made right by the nature of its intrinsic features. He explains that in order to see this we may need to do some “general thinking”, which involves considering the consequences of the proposed action “in order to realize that in the action we should originate A”, and “we may have to take into account the relation B involved in the situation, which we had hitherto failed to notice”. In doing so we may appreciate the rightness of the action, the appreciation of what we shall be doing in so acting “being an activity of *moral* thinking.”<sup>41</sup> He suggests, as an example of relevant consequences, that “we may not appreciate the wrongness of telling a certain story until we realise that we should thereby be hurting the feelings of one of our audience”; and of a relevant relation, “we may not appreciate the obligation to give X a present, until we remember that he has done us an act of kindness.”<sup>42</sup>

Prichard’s comments on the nature of the moral thinking involved are interesting: “given that by a process which is, of course, merely a process of general and not of moral thinking we come to recognize that the proposed act is one by which we shall originate A in a relation

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<sup>39</sup> Prichard, *Moral Writings*, 12.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

B, then we appreciate the obligation immediately or directly, the appreciation being an activity of *moral* thinking... This apprehension is immediate, in precisely the sense in which a mathematical apprehension is immediate.”<sup>43</sup> He accounts for the tendency to think that obligations need proof rather than being self-evident by the “fact that an act which is referred to as an obligation may be incompletely stated, what I have called the preliminaries to appreciating the obligation being incomplete.”<sup>44</sup> The description of the action, to display its nature as an obligation, must include reference to such morally relevant things as the consequences or the relationships involved (I’m sure Prichard did not think these the only relevant features, or always relevant; they are offered as factors and not as conditions), and the absence of such explicit reference may understandably prompt someone to ask why they ought to do it. When the description is fully spelled out, the need to ask is obviated, as it will present the action in the way that makes its moral significance explicit. Thomas Hurka puts this by saying that according to Prichard’s intuitionist epistemology, “the proper description of a moral duty must always mention its explanatory ground”.<sup>45</sup> Prichard regards as “general thinking” our recognition of the features of the situation under some description or other, and as “moral thinking” the recognition that an action under some description constitutes an obligation. Describing an action as ‘Giving something to someone’ is not morally perspicuous, but describing it as ‘returning a kindness’ is: this is one action under two possible descriptions, the latter of which displays the action in its moral light and indicates why it is right. That is why he says,

“The negative side of all this is, of course, that we do not come to appreciate an obligation by means of an *argument*, i.e. by a process of non-moral thinking, and that, in particular, we do not do so by an argument of which a premise is the ethical but not moral activity of appreciating the goodness either of the act or of a consequence of the act; i.e. that our sense of the rightness of an act is not a conclusion from our appreciation of the goodness either of it or of anything else.”<sup>46</sup>

He recognizes that this view may disappoint those who want to systematize morality, by leaving our various obligations “an unrelated chaos”,<sup>47</sup> since he has denied that there is any feature common to all right actions that can aid in identifying them or explaining why they are right. He has now rejected both “Kantian” and “Utilitarian” attempts to justify acting

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas Hurka, “Underivative Duty: Prichard on Moral Obligation”, *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 27 No. 2 (Jul 2010), 115.

<sup>46</sup> Prichard, *Moral Writings*, 13-14.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

morally by reference to the goodness of something other than the action, and also instrumental arguments that seek to justify acting rightly by reference to the agent's good. An action is constituted an obligation by being the action that it is – a return of a kindness, a forbearing to tell a hurtful story – and our recognition both of what action it is, and of the fact that it is obligatory, is immediate and not a conclusion drawn from non-moral premises.

In denying the relevance of motive to obligation he also asserts the mutual independence of morality and virtue, and the impossibility of explaining one in terms of the other.<sup>48</sup> A virtue cannot be derived from an obligation, he says, because it would make virtue consist in the carrying out of obligation. He doesn't spell out the wrongness of this – I take it to be both that much of virtue is shown in supererogatory action, and that action in accord with duty is not thereby virtuous, perhaps better, does not give much clue as to the nature of virtue. Hurka notes Sidgwick's comment that "the ancient philosophers did not distinguish between the questions 'What ought I to do, all things considered?' and 'What will make my life go best?'"<sup>49</sup> Any connection there may be between the answers to these two questions is not self-evident, and Prichard clearly was of the view that acting in accord with duty does not always make the agent's life go well.

On the other hand, Prichard says an obligation cannot be derived from a virtue since to say that we have obligations to act kindly, courageously, helpfully, is to say we ought to carry out certain actions from the possession of a desire, or trait, and this displaces the duty from the deed to its cause in the state or character of the person – it makes it our duty to act from certain desires, or to be virtuous, rather than to do the right thing.<sup>50</sup> While it might be a duty to strive to be a decent human being, this is far from all our duty, and cannot obviously tell us what we ought to do in situations as they arise. Prichard says we can act either virtuously or morally or both in the same act, as when we act both from the desire to help another and from the sense that it is our duty to do so, but these are distinct motives of action, if equally worthy. It is true that "we regard that action as the best in which both motives are combined; in other words, we regard as the really best man the man in whom virtue and morality are united",<sup>51</sup> but the motives themselves are distinct – as he puts it: "Desire and the sense of obligation are co-ordinate forms or species of motive."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17.

<sup>49</sup> Hurka, "Underivative Duty", 131.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

This, according to Prichard, explains the unsatisfactoriness, as he sees it, of Aristotle's *Ethics*: Aristotle did not provide what Prichard thought philosophers wanted, a convincing argument that we ought to do something that, until we started to reflect, we accepted without question that we ought to do. That is because, in Prichard's view, "a systematic account of the virtuous character cannot possibly satisfy this demand. At best it can only make clear to us the details of one of our obligations, viz. the obligation to make ourselves better men; but the achievement of this does not help us to discover what we ought to do in life as a whole, and why; to think that it did would be to think that our only business in life was self-improvement."<sup>53</sup> Prichard's preoccupation is with the explanation of duty, and in particular, why we ought to do it; Aristotle in his view, like the instrumentalist, the consequentialist and the Kantian, gives the wrong explanation. In so far as Aristotle could be said to answer the original question, 'why ought we to do what we morally ought?', it would appear his answer would be that it is good for us, it makes for a good life for a human being. In other words, Prichard sees Aristotle's answer as falling into one or other of the two types of answer into which he thought any answer to the question will fall. It may appear to belong to the first type, and Prichard may have thought it did, although Aristotle did not think of right action as instrumental to personal happiness, and to be done for that reason.<sup>54</sup> Prichard's objection therefore, as with his objection to consequentialism, is that it is not true that doing our duty always brings about good, or necessarily contributes to our overall well-being,<sup>55</sup> and that even if it did, this is not what makes it right. We do not do right for our own good, as he said in his answer to the consequentialist, but because it is right.

Prichard dismissed epistemology as sweepingly as moral philosophy, seeing a parallel error in the attempt to prove that we know what we thought we knew before being undermined by recognition of the possibility of error. He says the demand for proof that we know what we claim to know is as illegitimate as the demand for proof that we ought to do what we think we ought. Both demands rest on confusion. Furthermore, the solution is the same in both cases. Descartes raised global doubt – that the possibility of error may mean we are always mistaken; he set us on a quest for the mark of true knowledge. We in effect want to know that we know; but then we must find a guarantee that we know we know, and so on *ad infinitum*. It seems we will never know that we know; unless we recognize that doubt about any claim to knowledge is doubt about whether that state qualifies as knowledge, as opposed to being some other state, such as belief. If the doubt is serious, then it can only be allayed in

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> I take that claim as it stands to be relatively uncontentious nowadays, although of course there is still much to discuss as to how Aristotle did conceive of the relation between virtue and a person's good.

<sup>55</sup> I will discuss this objection of Prichard's in connection with his criticism of Plato in ch.4.

the ordinary and usual way, by checking. If we should seriously doubt that our thought that  $7 \times 4 = 28$  is a state of knowledge, what we are really doubting is not that any knowledge is possible, but that this is an instance of it, or, in other words, we are doubting the correctness of our belief. To ascertain its truth we check in the normal way, by reworking the sum, or consulting a table, etc. So with the moral case, “the sense that we ought to do certain things arises in our unreflective consciousness, being an activity of moral thinking occasioned by the various situations in which we find ourselves.”<sup>56</sup> We tend to accept our obligations without question until we find one that is contrary to our interest, when it “raises the doubt whether after all these obligations are really obligatory, i.e. whether our sense that we ought not to do certain things is not an illusion.”<sup>57</sup> To resolve the doubt, “The only remedy lies in actually getting into a situation which occasions the obligation, or – if our imagination be strong enough – in imagining ourselves in that situation, and then letting our moral capacities of thinking do their work.”<sup>58</sup> This point also addresses global doubt, the first of the four questions I identified above – that of the reality of obligation in general. The solution for sceptical doubt about the reality of morality lies in being in a moral situation, when all doubt will evaporate before the moral demand. In being confronted by and recognizing an obligation, one at the same time recognizes its reality, its authority, its content and why it is right.

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## 5. COMMENTS ON PRICHARD’S ARGUMENTS

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Perhaps Prichard’s dismissal of moral philosophy was sweeping. Perhaps he was simply wrong that the whole of moral philosophy consists of attempts to answer the question “Why should we meet our moral obligations?” since many other questions have been addressed in the history of the subject, such as whether moral obligations really exist, what their basis is, which obligations we have, what it is to live our lives well, whether happiness is the end of all action and questions about the truth of moral assertions, the meaning of moral language and the role of reason in morality, to mention but a few. In his defence, if we can allow that Whitehead had a point in saying that the European philosophical tradition consists of a series of footnotes to Plato,<sup>59</sup> another sweeping summary, then we can agree with Prichard that Plato did indeed raise the “improper” question in the *Republic* and that it has been addressed

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> A N Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1929), Pt II, Ch 1, §1, p.39.

repeatedly by other philosophers quite possibly before and certainly ever since; we can also surely accept that many philosophical questions are closely related to each other, and that the seamless nature of philosophy tends to mean that answers to one question cannot but have ramifications for others, and this one is no exception. It is not contentious to say that it is a fundamental question, which is perhaps just another way of saying the same thing. Further, it is not unusual for philosophers to make sweeping remarks of this kind, that are not intended absolutely literally (might that be something like: ‘moral philosophy has always explicitly addressed one question alone, there is no other, the question manifests an erroneous assumption and therefore the subject has no real substance’?), but that doesn’t mean they are not serious: I take Prichard to mean no more than that there are some important misconceptions in the subject that have been the source of much confusion, and that it is worth trying to understand why an issue, a nexus of issues, can, apparently, remain unresolved for so long. That has perplexed not a few moral philosophers, indeed it is the substance of philosophy. It is a question about the very nature of philosophy, as well as moral philosophy, and I think it pertinent. While he can be criticized for misreading other philosophers, and being somewhat indiscriminate in charging them with error, his arguments can be considered in their own right. At any rate, I am willing to allow him his doubts about the subject. It should be noted that Prichard said the investigation was worth doing, indeed “vitally important”,<sup>60</sup> because only in conducting it do we become aware of our misconceptions and gain deeper understanding. My interest is in the insight a re-examination of some of his views might provide into the nature of moral thinking and rationality.

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### 5.1. THE MISSING PREMISE

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Prichard criticized those attempts to show why we should do what we ought that take the strategy he identified as “Utilitarianism” – answering the question in terms of productivity of good. He claimed that there is a missing premise, ‘that good ought to be’, in the argument from the existence of goods to the conclusion that we ought to bring them about by action. It doesn’t matter how the missing premise is worded, the basic point is sound, and that is that there is no logical entailment from the fact of the existence of some good to any action by anyone. The lack is in practice often supplied by a premise referring to a desire, but that cannot bridge the logical gap, because it merely supplies yet another fact, and may give appearance of plausibility by appealing to the general knowledge that people in fact go about getting what they want by taking suitable means, but which does not provide an explanation of why they ought, if they ought, to bring about the good.

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<sup>60</sup> Prichard, *Moral Writings*, 20.



He is not here disputing that there are goods, nor, according to Hurka,<sup>61</sup> that it can be a specific duty of someone to produce a good, nor even that there is a general duty to do good (although it seems to me a general duty to do good could only be a duty all people have to do good when they can. What good any of us can do would seem to be a matter that only circumstances could reveal as they transpire, and hence this duty rather looks as though it simply breaks down into disparate underivative specific duties of particular people; I shall comment further on that when I take up Prichard's second point, below). All this argument denies is that a duty to produce good can be rationally demonstrated by appeal to non-moral considerations – that morally neutral reasons can be given in the form of premises of an argument that rationally compel the conclusion either that we, generally, ought to produce good or that X, particularly, ought to produce some specified good. The point of this objection is not to deny that we should produce good, but to deny that it has been demonstrated that we should.

Prichard's point is simply that arguments are either deductive or inductive, and this is neither of those. Alternative conclusions are consistent with such premises as that a thing is good and that certain people are available to bring it about, and even that those people are especially, even uniquely, well-placed for doing so, and no recognized fallacy will have been committed. There is nothing inconsistent about acknowledging the goodness of something, or acknowledging that and any number of other premises aimed at showing the ideal suitability of some individual for acting in a particular way at a particular time in the expectation of that good as an outcome, and rejecting any suggestion that that person ought to act to produce that good. Since so much of this sort of detail is in practice usually left unstated when deciding who should do what, clearly much is assumed by those who claim that people, or someone, ought to produce some good, and it may be perfectly legitimate in life to so assume, but logically, the conclusions don't follow. For example, a remark such as, 'It would please Hetty if you took her flowers' might well be enough, in life, to press me to conclude that I ought to take Hetty flowers and to my resolving to do so, and yet, in different circumstances, it might not. I might say, sincerely, 'I know it would, but I just can't at the moment.' The fact that I can't do it at the moment might equally be enough, in life, to legitimate all parties' willingness to agree that I am not obliged – either way, it doesn't logically entail it. Perhaps it might be said that while the conclusion is not strictly logical, it is in some other way legitimate: but in what way a conclusion that does not follow the recognized logical patterns can be legitimate is precisely the question at issue – the nature of

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<sup>61</sup> Hurka, "Underivative Duty", 116-117.

moral rationality – and Prichard would not have disputed that a sensible conversation could be had about what one ought to do, one which would involve processes of “general thinking” and “moral thinking” to which he alludes and which he briefly illustrates. I will elaborate on that in chapter 5.

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## 5.2. OUR MORAL CONVICTIONS

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His second point about this attempt to justify morality, that it fails to correspond to our convictions, aims in addition to deny that producing good is what we should do at all.<sup>62</sup> It does not just claim that not all the things we should do come down to producing an independently conceived good, allowing that while producing good may be a duty there are other duties not reducible to it; nor does it claim that any duty to do anything is partly underivative and partly grounded in the goodness of so doing. It denies that the bringing about of good is ever what we are obliged to do. He gives two reasons for this. The first is that sometimes a duty that cannot be evaded will not in fact produce good. This might be thought compatible with there being, amongst other specific duties, also a duty to produce what is good. However, if we have a duty to produce good, and a duty to, say, do justice (his example) and occasions arise where “the balance of resulting good may be, and often is, not on the side of justice”<sup>63</sup> then there would appear to be a conflict between this general vague duty to produce good and the specific requirements in the particular circumstances, in this case of justice. Moreover it is a conflict which consequentialists would resolve by saying the duty to produce good is overriding, which would result in justice not being done. Of course, if we do what justice requires, we will, if we think that it was the right thing to do on this occasion, think that a good thing; but we are not, in so saying, speaking favourably of the outcome of the situation that we so regret. The second reason Prichard gives is that the production of good is not the reason why we do what we do even when good is produced as a result of what we do. In all cases, what we are obliged to do is a deed under some description, and if on some occasion we are obliged to act so as to bring about some state of affairs, then it will indeed be the case that the state of affairs is good, and the bringing about of it is good, but that the state of affairs is good is not what renders it obligatory to bring it about, and that acting so as to bring it about is good is not what makes it an obligation to do so; rather, the state of affairs is good because of its internal characteristics, its being the situation as described; and acting to bring it about is good because it is a good thing to do

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<sup>62</sup> In so claiming, I am disagreeing with Hurka’s interpretation, on p.117 of the paper mentioned in the previous footnote, in which he argues that Prichard’s argument is consistent with recognizing a duty to promote the good, as Ross did.

<sup>63</sup> Prichard, *Moral Writings*, 10.

what, because of its internal characteristics, must be done. Prichard regards this kind of attempt to justify acting morally as simplification to the point of distortion, even when it yields the same verdicts as to what we ought to do, but it does not always yield the same verdicts.

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### 5.3. KANT AND ARISTOTLE

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The “Kantian” argument, the second form of the second way of answering the “improper question”, was that an action is right if it is intrinsically good, construed as being done from a good motive, either recognition of duty or an admirable desire, such as the desire for someone’s good. Prichard objected that the argument failed to justify duty because a good motive cannot confer rightness on an action; it can indeed prompt wrong actions. If the claim is that a good motive makes an action right, then there is need to explain what makes a motive good; if the answer to that is the rightness of the action, then the argument is circular. That seems fair enough, though even Prichard did not think Kant made the claim. He did think Kant thought that right precedes good, that an action has to be recognized as right independently of any motive in order for anyone to be motivated to do it (or indeed not to do it). Prichard also denied that the sense of duty was the only good motive; Kant does appear to have denied the moral worth of acting out of admirable inclinations such as amiability, kindness, and so on, whereas Prichard regards these as motives of equal worth with that of the sense of duty. But however worthy the motive, it is independent of what morality requires to be done and Kant was at least right to say that a good will is determined by the dictates of morality.

The wider point Prichard made in connection with this concerned the independence of duty and virtue, and that seems sound. Again he may have read Aristotle wrongly, as making a reductive claim that acting virtuously brings about the agent’s happiness, which is to say that he may have read him as giving the instrumental or prudential answer to the original question. Firstly, ignoring for the moment whether this is what Aristotle said, his objections to the instrumental justification for morality seem sound. They will get a fuller treatment in chapter 4 in connection with Plato, whom he read in a similar way. Secondly, as Hurka suggests,<sup>64</sup> his objections may have some force against Aristotle anyway. Aristotle did say that, fortune permitting, virtue is conducive to a good life for a human being and essential to being a good human being. The element of his view with which Prichard seems to have been impatient may be its exclusive interest in the agent. He may have thought that this simply

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<sup>64</sup> Hurka, “Underivative Duty”, 130.

fails to capture the reality that moral demands are often directed at the good of others, sometimes require a sacrifice of personal good on the part of the agent, and there is no obvious connection, certainly not a necessary one, between a life in obedience to duty and the kind of well-being Aristotle appeared to have in mind.

Returning to Prichard's criticism of Kant, Hurka points out that in his paper on Kant,<sup>65</sup> Prichard objects to Kant's basing all particular duties on the one fundamental principle, the Categorical Imperative. His objection parallels that against consequentialism, which was that it tries to reduce all moral duty to a single principle, and in so doing misrepresents the nature of obligation: if, rather than being an unrelated chaos, our duty is simply to produce good, or act as the categorical imperative permits or enjoins, then we are mistaken in thinking what we ought to do is return a kindness to this person, maintain a dignified silence on this issue, and so on, because really our sole duty is to produce good, or accord with the application of the categorical imperative. The problem again is not merely that of misrepresenting what it is our duty to do, but also the possibility of creating a conflict between what we immediately see to be required and what the principle appears to enjoin, thus yielding the wrong moral verdicts. Further, it misrepresents the reason why the action is right. He argues, "No one could suppose that the reason why an act ought to be done consists in the fact that every one could do it"<sup>66</sup> and criticizes Kant's examples for failing to support his claim, since in Prichard's view it would be possible for all to act on those maxims Kant argues cannot be universalized.<sup>67</sup> That test sometimes yields a permission rather than an obligation or prohibition, but Prichard appears to think that the test does not show what we may do any more than what we ought to do, since he says we all could, and could will that all did, commit suicide when the going gets tough, make lying promises to suit our interests, neglect our talents and decline to help others.<sup>68</sup> Clearly, the application of the categorical imperative has been much discussed on this point, which might suggest that all principles require interpretation, and that itself is a point in Prichard's favour. He thinks even Kant does not really apply the principle, but rather, for example, derives his injunction to help the needy from the fact that we each desire to be helped when in need.<sup>69</sup> As with consequentialism, not only is it not the reason why an action is right, but it fails to identify which actions are our duties.

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<sup>65</sup> "Kant's Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals", in Prichard, *Moral Writings*, 50-76.

<sup>66</sup> Prichard, *Moral Writings*, 59.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-61.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* The references to Kant are to the *Groundwork*, §§4.421-4.424.

This should not be taken to imply that he denies that there are general moral principles. What he denies is that amenability to universalization can either identify a particular action as a duty or show why it is right, and that there is any single general principle underlying the multiplicity of duties. Indeed, he says Kant's mistake is only "the expression in too extreme a form of the true conviction that any moral rule is universally binding"<sup>70</sup> – from which I take it that he thinks there are moral rules, and they are universally binding, but that this is not equivalent to the claim that if an action can be done by all then it must be morally permissible, still less that this fact constitutes it morally permissible, and less still a duty.<sup>71</sup> But rather than thinking we infer particular duties from general principles, he thinks we appreciate our duty always as a particular requirement in particular circumstances, but in so far as we articulate what we ought in those circumstances to do, a principle is implied by the statement of it: this I take to be the import of his remark that "Our obligations are, no doubt, always *particular*, e.g. to pay a certain debt to X; and what we directly recognize is always a *particular* obligation. But in recognizing it we imply the truth of a *principle*."<sup>72</sup> Prichard nevertheless has a good deal of sympathy with Kant, saying he "is much more nearly right than is usually supposed" and that it was a particular merit of his that he did not make the mistake of supposing "that we discover what we ought to do in particular circumstances by applying the general rules. (Cf. our procedure in geometry.)"<sup>73</sup>

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#### 5.4. INTUITION

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Prichard's objection to consequentialism appeals to intuition, and could be answered by consequentialists in the same way, as Hurka points out.<sup>74</sup> His objection was that reference to the goodness of things fails to explain an obligation, not because there is a better explanation but because there is no explanation, our recognition of rightness being underivative. Consequentialists can equally claim that what they see as the single fundamental principle of duty is underivative and immediately apprehended. It may be asked, 'Why ought we to keep promises, help the needy, thank those who have helped us, etc.?' Prichard answers that a general answer cannot be given because each duty is basic and underivative and directly apprehended, but if asked why we should follow the single moral principle to produce good, consequentialists can say no answer can be given because that principle is basic and underivative and directly apprehended. The production of good can be thought of by consequentialists as a fundamental principle, the source of more specific duties but not itself

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>71</sup> Prichard makes the point in terms of obligations, but I think it also applies to permissions.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> Hurka, "Underivative Duty", 119.

derivable from anything more basic. They can happily agree with Prichard that the fact that certain things are good does not explain why we ought to comply with the basic moral principle, to produce good, but equally, there is nothing to show why we ought to comply with any of the irreducible plurality of duties he thinks we have. Prichard says this is something we just immediately recognize, and consequentialists can say the same about their basic principle.

There are three issues here – plurality, underivativeness and what makes actions right. Firstly, when Prichard says moral duty is underivative, he does not always distinguish between two claims: that moral duty in general is not derivable from anything outside morality because morality is autonomous, or *sui generis*, and that particular duties are not derivable from a more general principle – he holds both to be true. Consequentialists may claim that all specific duties derive from a single basic principle, which may or may not itself be a moral principle. Thus the single principle explains why certain specific actions are duties but is itself fundamental and without explanation. In that case the point of difference between them and Prichard is about the derivability of particular duties, and hence about the number of basic duties there are – they say there is one, and he says there are many.

Secondly, consequentialists need not further claim that the single moral principle is itself derived from somewhere else – from a source outside morality, perhaps even from a non-normative source. Some consequentialists do make this move and others do not. Those who do not are at least in agreement with Prichard about the underivativeness of morality generally, their disagreement being on the matter of the derivability of particular duties. However, thirdly, if one thinks there is only one fundamental moral principle, then one will think that all the apparently various specific duties are unified in terms of being brought under this principle, say, productivity of good, which is to say that they all share a single right-making feature. Thus rightness is constituted by a single feature common to right actions, and the presence of the feature is explanatory of the rightness of an action. Prichard says there is no such feature; in his view the intrinsic features of each action explain its rightness, and there is no feature common to all right actions, so the explanation of rightness is different for each one.

He says “there is this element of truth in the Utilitarian view, that unless we recognized that something which an act will originate is good, we should not recognize that we ought to do the action.”<sup>75</sup> Hurka interprets this to mean that Prichard allows that one of our duties is to

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<sup>75</sup> Prichard, *Moral Writings*, 10.

do good. Prichard cannot mean that we first establish that an action originates something good in order to judge, on that basis, that we ought to do it – that is the view he rejects. Rather, if an action is the origination of something good it could be something we ought to do, for we would not think that we ought to do a thing if we see it as originating something bad. The goodness originated is not what makes it a duty – not all actions originating good are duties, even if all duties originate something good – and I’m not sure even the latter is necessarily entailed by Prichard’s thought here. Rightness is not dependent on goodness, in his view. Rather, when an action is morally required, its being morally required constitutes the deed a good thing to do; further, it is a good thing to do what is morally required – in that sense, doing something that is independently seen as right can be seen to be the origination of something good – to originate such an action is to originate what will culminate in duty having been done, which is a good thing, a good state of affairs. None of that involves the idea that we have a duty to originate something independently judged to be good, to produce good states of affairs, to multiply good things, or is in any way dependent on judgments of the goodness of something. For this reason, whatever morality requires just has to be grasped, for the goodness of a thing may not be a clue. So, while some consequentialists will agree with Prichard that moral duty in general is not derived from some other source, Prichard and consequentialists differ on whether there is one basic underivative duty or many, and this bases disagreement on what makes an action right.

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### 5.5. DERIVING MORALITY FROM AN EXTERNAL SOURCE

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Those who think moral duty in general derivative from some external source may differ on what the source is – whether a non-moral source, such as rationality, or an entirely non-normative source, human nature being the obvious candidate. These need not be consequentialists – proponents of any normative moral theory or none may in principle hold these views. Those who see morality in general as derivable from facts about humanity and the world tend to be called ethical naturalists; those who see morality in general as derivable from rationality are moral rationalists. Since Prichard is emphatic in his denial of the derivability of morality from any outside source, it would seem that he cannot be described as either a naturalist, or, more immediately relevant to present purposes, a moral rationalist, and in the ensuing chapters I shall discuss the claims of moral rationalists in detail and say more to place Prichard in relation to that view.

The first type of answer identified by Prichard, offering prudential reasons to be moral, derives morality from an external, non-moral source. Prichard rejects it because in his view

it is eliminative, excluding the moral 'ought' by converting it into an instrumental 'ought', thus resolving obligation into inclination.<sup>76</sup> This eliminates obligation by substituting for the normative concept of obligation the descriptive notion of desire. When we do something because we want to, we do not do it because we ought to; if it is true that we ought to do it, information about what motivated us to do it will not explain that fact. Attempting to explain that we act in certain ways because we desire to obtain the perceived advantage that such actions will bring us simply avoids accounting for obligatoriness; indeed obligation is replaced by inclination. It may be thought that the only reasons for action are instrumental reasons, but in that case there are no justifying reasons –there is no such thing as obligation.

It might be suggested that obligation is purely conventional, that rules are made for the advantage of society and there is a general tacit consent to follow them, out of a recognition of the overall benefit of doing so and a desire to avoid sanctions for not doing so. If that is seriously thought, the solution for any doubt about the reality of the moral 'ought' was, according to Prichard, to be confronted by an actual obligation in life; then one could no more question the genuineness of moral obligation than the existence of the hand in front of Moore's face. Again, Prichard would say the idea does not correspond with our moral convictions. No doubt there are some duties we have as citizens to other citizens and to the collectivity, but whether these are purely conventional is itself questionable, and this can only be a part of our moral duty. Apart from such duties, we do not think of a moral situation in terms of its contribution to the good of humanity, we do not feel the sense of obligation correctly represented as either a conditioned response or as the result of an assessment of the social consequences of our action, or as the fear of sanctions. Often what we fear most is our own remorse if we do not heed obligation, and especially when required to act for someone else's benefit. That there is a hypothetical explanation for this in terms of our socialization process itself requires proof; Prichard preferred to think that things are as they seem to be. Further, as he said, we recognize occasions when we do not benefit from doing our duty, and it is precisely in situations where duty exacts a personal cost that we are prompted to doubt in the first place – only, on reflection, to see that in spite of the costs we must do as the situation requires. All of this simply invites opponents to reflect and see whether they agree, and they may not do so. However, the opposing viewpoint is surely not more secure than Prichard's: either we accept that things are as they seem, and sometimes we act for the good of another, or we are forced to accept an explanation for the discrepancy between appearances and our supposed true motivations conjectured in order to support the instrumental view, and that explanation is less plausible than the appearances.

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.



The upshot is that Prichard finds unsatisfactory all attempts to give reasons why we ought to do what we morally ought, and gives his own reasons for doubting that it is possible. What he thinks of as self-evident, once we have thought about a matter, is the thing we ought to do – but that just is seeing what precisely morality requires, why it requires it, that we ought to do it, and hence, of necessity, seeing that obligation is real. We need look no further for an explanation, since the explanation does not lie beyond what we see when we consider, and come to appreciate, the nature of the situation itself. We may see that we ought to relieve a certain person's distress, because we are aware of their distress and stand in a particular relation to them, whether that relation is that we just happen to be nearest to them or that we have particular personal or family ties, or perhaps, that we caused the distress or that we have a special gift for comforting those in distress. That list is not exhaustive, but is intended to show that by "relation" Prichard means only that obligation arises from a very particular connection between people, created by circumstances, and the character of the connection is precisely what general and moral thinking serves to reveal to us and can only do so in real life situations.

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## 5.6. PRICHARD'S POSITIVE VIEW, MORAL RATIONALISM AND THE FOUR QUESTIONS

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Prichard holds in his epistemological argument that in being confronted by a moral demand in ordinary life, one cannot but recognize that morality is no illusion, and that we must do what we are called upon in the circumstances to do. In recognizing a moral demand, we at the same time see that that is the thing we have to do, and by implication, that there is nothing further to consider – moral obligations are therefore decisive in determining how we shall act. Yet his intuitionism does not involve holding that we necessarily instantly know what morality demands of us. He repeatedly says that we may have to reflect on our situation before we appreciate what is the right thing to do. Having engaged in processes of non-moral and moral thinking and thereby come to appreciate the details of the situation, we arrive at a position of knowing what we are obliged to do, e.g. to report someone's negligence, apologize to someone, try to calm brewing tensions between warring parties, and so on. Prichard draws a parallel with the theory of knowledge to show that, in the same way that we know that there exists a world of things outside our minds, or that some particular fact is the case, some calculation is correct, so we know when we are under an obligation, and what it is we must do, and that it is in the nature of an obligation that we ought to comply. Prichard does not, however, suppose that our confidence in the thought of what we must do need be unassailable: in an earlier essay, he says, "owing to the complication of

human relations, the problem of what one ought to do, from the point of life as a whole, must present itself to any thinking man as one of intense difficulty and, indeed, doubt.”<sup>77</sup> Nor does he claim infallibility; but like Wittgenstein he does take the possibility of being mistaken about a moral requirement to imply the possibility of being right,<sup>78</sup> and our being right to be ascertainable by checking ordinary relevant considerations. That is the force of his argument that the only way to allay doubt about what we ought to do or whether we ought to do it is to attend to the particularities of the situation and re-evaluate, just as, if we come to doubt something we have believed, we go back and check the relevant facts. The relevance of that for my current purpose is that ‘knowledge’ and ‘being right’ imply objectivity, in some sense, and it is the quest for objectivity that motivates the attempts of moral rationalists to argue for the possibility of rational justification for acting morally; it is their perceived failure that prompts anti-rationalists to deny the rationality of morality. That Prichard could claim that we can have knowledge of moral obligation, as well as being in doubt about it or wrong about it, while denying the rational justifiability of that knowledge by argument, suggests his conception of moral rationality, to the extent that he had one, differs from that shared by moral rationalists and anti-rationalists, and the rest of this dissertation is an attempt to clarify that.

Put briefly, in light of the underivative nature of moral duty, Prichard sees the resolution of scepticism about the reality, the authority, the content of moral demands and about what makes right actions right, to lie not in any argument but in encountering moral circumstances in life, when one will be confronted by the reality of moral obligation from which all the rest follows, or perhaps more properly, in which all the rest inheres. His conception of duty as “absolutely underivative” applies at each of these levels. It meant to him that it is improper to ask whether we ought to do what morality requires. There can be no serious doubt about there being such things as obligations and no inferring the existence of morality as a whole from a non-moral foundation (from empirical facts, for example); there can be no inferring that we ought to do our duty from a source of validation outside morality, whether normative, such as rationality, or non-normative, such as psychology; and there is no common right-making factor which would enable us to infer our particular duties, we simply have to “appreciate” the moral nature of the situation. In an earlier paper he puts it thus: “the fact that I have promised to pay a man so much is the reason why I ought to pay it, i.e. that the connexion between the obligation to pay and my having promised is immediate, i.e. that

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<sup>77</sup> “What is the basis of moral obligation?” in Prichard, *Moral Writings*, 6.

<sup>78</sup> Prichard took moral truth and moral facts for granted, without pursuing that in the direction in which moral realism has subsequently taken it; in my view one can ‘be right’, morally, in a suitable sense, which I shall elaborate on in chapter 5, and with which I take Prichard’s view to be consistent though it goes beyond anything he said.

the one directly necessitates the other, as the straightness of a line necessitates its being the shortest way between its ends.”<sup>79</sup>

R. F. Holland makes a similar point to Prichard’s on moral scepticism.<sup>80</sup> He argues that philosophical scepticism, as opposed to something that might be termed scepticism which is rather an attitude or manner of cynicism born of disappointment in philosophical argument, cannot seriously be maintained, indeed that a coherent position cannot be articulated. Rather, it is usually found that sceptical arguments raise isolated points of specific doubt rather than giving “a fully argued statement of the sceptical position”.<sup>81</sup> In his view philosophical scepticism is not a tenable intellectual position because it cannot meet what would be “the logical requirements of scepticism”.<sup>82</sup> He means that such scepticism as is presented, and he regards moral scepticism as best expressed in Plato’s dialogues, “never turns out to be backed by anything solid in the way of logic but is either hinted at or expounded sophistically”.<sup>83</sup> Here he refers to Plato’s *Phaedo*, in which Socrates criticizes those who, unskilled in argument, blame the limitations of argument rather than their lack of skill, for failing to establish any truth about reality by means of it, comparing them to people who become distrustful of everyone because as a result of their unrealistic expectations of people, not informed by truth, they have been disappointed. They tend to profess scepticism as a wise discovery, but their position does not stand up to scrutiny.<sup>84</sup>

Holland explains what he means by the logical requirements that make the idea of moral scepticism hard to grasp. Sceptical doubt is not, he says, the same as ‘reserved judgment’ pending the outcome of further enquiries, an intellectually respectable position. That doubt is not shown erroneous by the discovery of new information. Scepticism will question every new datum and never be satisfied. Another kind of doubt, that is internal to its subject, is not terminated by new information but rather by coming to an understanding where previously one had not made sense of what was known. Here, the new understanding shows the doubt to have been misplaced: understanding was there to be had, as it were, and any doubt was not due to lack of information but to not seeing the matter in the right way. It may take effort

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<sup>79</sup> Prichard, *Moral Writings*, p.4.

<sup>80</sup> R F Holland and Jonathan Harrison, Symposium: “Moral Scepticism”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, Vol. 41 (1967), 185-214.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>82</sup> He also identifies another form of scepticism, which could be seen as genuine, but which arises out of despair or “unreasoned misanthropy”; and this is not doubt about the rightness of moral claims, but rather despair of there being any good in the world. He says this kind of scepticism itself “has a moral character”. It does not stand outside morality and pronounce that morality is not real or lacks authority, but within morality, and sees the world as hopelessly bad.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>84</sup> Holland is referring to Plato, *Phaedo*, 90c.

to do that, but it will not be achieved through the acquisition of new data. This also is intellectually respectable; some things are difficult to grasp. But scepticism is not puzzlement about something which one reasonably supposes time or effort will dispel. Then there are other things, which are “inherently dubious”,<sup>85</sup> for example astrology, or the claims made by politicians before an election: one does not engage with the claims made, but rather points out the naivety of taking them seriously – in the case of astrology, there is nothing that could show them false, because they purport to speak of human destiny, and in the case of politicians’ claims, I’m guessing, they are often, like advertising slogans, open to wide interpretation and therefore devoid of content while intended to reach the audience’s subliminal concerns. There are also many matters over which scepticism has no place, “like the question whether an egg is a good egg”<sup>86</sup> – I take him to mean that there are some matters which are not matters of fact verifiable by checking, and probably also not sufficiently important, and hence simply not suitable matters over which to express scepticism, as opposed to say, disagreement in taste or response – to express sceptical doubt about the truth of such a claim would be to imply that consensus could and should be reached upon it by means of some method of establishing the truth, and that it matters that it is.

Given these thoughts about the nature of doubt, what can be said about moral scepticism? Holland says that if someone maintained scepticism about morality seriously, they would have to make a case for it.<sup>87</sup> Clearly, like Prichard, he thinks the presumption is in favour of our moral condition being as it seems to be, but he has given the above considerations to prompt reflection on what such a case could require. There is not room here to discuss this, though in my last chapter I suggest a route that bypasses the usual realist versus anti-realist dialogue. My immediate interest is in expounding Holland’s approach to scepticism and its similarity to Prichard on the separability of the questions I set out at the beginning of the chapter. His point is that it is not clear what would be involved in making a coherent case for moral scepticism: “there would have to be in existence a form of enquiry or set of ideas that established to the satisfaction of many, if not most, educated people that whenever we judge an action to be (for instance) noble or vicious we are, not sometimes but always, talking through our hats.” He is inviting the reader to seriously consider the ramifications, if they can, of thinking that the morality with which human life is shot through is illusory, and that

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<sup>85</sup> Holland, “Moral Scepticism”, 187.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>87</sup> Some may think Mackie and later anti-realist writers do this (J. L. Mackie, *Ethics, Inventing Right and Wrong* (London, Penguin Books, 1977)). Since my aim is to address the issue of the authority or rationality of morality, rather than its reality, I cannot deal with that topic here. The relevance here is for the implications of this approach for the connections between the different questions I identified at the start.

there is no meaning to be attached to our utterances and actions. Since he wrote that article there are more people willing to suggest just this, it seems. Discussing that goes beyond my immediate purpose; right now I will say that moral scepticism is not in his view a position that is or could be adopted by real people living real lives. Allowing this, without having to commit Holland to an intuitionist epistemology and a non-naturalist metaphysics, he is like Prichard in regarding the phenomena to be constitutive of morality, rather than thinking that there must be something else behind the phenomena to validate and explain them. So, when, or since, we are morally in the thick of it, there can be no question as to the reality of morality, nor, at the same time, as to its nature, and therefore, as to its authority. Thus Holland too regards as ill-conceived the question whether we really ought to do what we morally ought. Put another way, he too sees the authority of morality as internal to its nature, and hence, to say that there really is such a thing as morality just is to say that there are authoritative requirements. Any doubt about its authority, about whether one really ought to do what one can see is morally required, may reveal existential insecurity, but not a tenable intellectual position. That is to say that what it is to recognize that one is under an obligation, in their view, involves recognizing that one ought to act thus and not that one has something more to find out before one knows what to do. This is the point on which moral rationalists and anti-rationalists demur. They claim that it is coherent both to accept the reality of morality and to question its authority, and that is to raise the possibility that, although one can be under an obligation, it may yet be that one ought not to do what one morally ought to do. They answer that in different ways, but they agree it is coherent to ask.

It would seem then that locating Prichard in relation to moral rationalism and anti-rationalism is not straightforward. Prichard rejects the basic premise that both moral rationalists and anti-rationalists accept, that it even makes sense to ask whether we ought to comply with moral requirements. Rationalists think there is a rational justification for complying with moral demands and anti-rationalists deny that there is, but they agree that the question can be asked. Prichard does not merely deny that there is a rational route to the conclusion that we ought to be moral, but does not accept the question. Yet he believes that it is possible to know that we ought to act morally.

The important issue on which they differ from Prichard then concerns the nature of the authority of morality. It seems at least *prima facie* consistent both to deny the reality of morality and thereby its authority, as error theorists do; or to assert the authority of morality and thereby its reality, as does Prichard. But some, like Prichard, regard it as inconsistent to accept its reality and at the same time question its authority, as both moral rationalists and anti-rationalists do. That appears to be to accept the reality of obligation and deny its

obligatoriness. How then is the nature or force of the obligatoriness of moral obligation to be understood?

Prichard, like Holland, takes obligatoriness in terms of moral authority but not, or not obviously, in terms of rational authority. Prichard might be prepared to assert its rational authority, but if so, he differs from moral rationalists on the meaning of this. Moral rationalists want to demonstrate the rational requiredness of fulfilling obligation. I will in the next two chapters discuss how moral rationalists attempt to defend and carry out that project and whether the project is coherent or successful. What in practice moral rationalists seek is what Prichard denies is either necessary or possible, an external justification of the obligatoriness of morality. Prichard's unarticulated presupposition is that the authority of morality is internal to its nature and in need of no external foundation.

## 6. OUTLINE OF ENSUING CHAPTERS

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In chapter 2 I shall look in detail at a version of strong moral rationalism defended by Anita Superson. I shall argue that her project is unlikely to succeed, but my criticism still leaves open a weaker version of rationalism. Chapter 3 examines Douglas Portmore's ingeniously modified position which attempts to accommodate the main objections to the strong version while preserving its important components. In my view this is also unsuccessful. In chapter 4 I return to Prichard, and discuss his essay "Duty and Interest" which deals in more detail with his argument against the instrumental justification of morality. In that paper he rejects the self-interest justification for acting morally, and includes Plato amongst those whom he thinks offered it. I shall argue that this is a misreading of Plato, and that had he read Plato correctly he would have seen that their views are much closer than he thought. Chapter 5 will assess Prichard's position on moral rationality, and in chapter 6 I argue that although Prichard barely developed his positive views about the nature of moral rationality, what he did say was not inconsistent with Iris Murdoch's more detailed conception which was of course a Platonic one.

## CHAPTER – 2 STRONG MORAL RATIONALISM

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### SUMMARY

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In this chapter I look at the arguments of one proponent of moral rationalism for the rationality of acting morally. Not all those who might be termed moral rationalists have the same preoccupations or conception of what the view entails; my concern is with those who address scepticism about the rationality of acting morally and attempt to argue from an independent conception of rationality to the rationality of morality. Anita Superson offers a version of this form of rationalism and argues for a conception of rationality on which all moral actions are deemed rational and all forms of immorality irrational, and I term this view strong moral rationalism.<sup>88</sup> Superson's treatment of the issues is particularly thorough, so if she succeeds she will have comprehensively defeated the sceptic who doubts that there is any reason to act morally, by showing that it is rational to do so. In fact she does not claim to have completed the project but to have set out what further work would be needed to refute the sceptic. She believes it needs to be shown that the sceptic has a mistaken conception of practical rationality, according to which it is rational to privilege oneself over others. She maintains it is inconsistent and therefore irrational to privilege oneself over others. It is inconsistent in her view because it violates a conception of rationality derived from the Kantian notion of humanity. I argue that this concept cannot do the work that she needs it to do, and that this approach to the vindication of morality may be unsuccessful because in principle mistaken. A weaker version of moral rationalism may still be viable, and I address that in the next chapter.

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<sup>88</sup> Anita Superson, *The Moral Sceptic* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009).

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## 1. THE MOTIVATION FOR MORAL RATIONALISM

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Moral rationalism is an approach to defending morality against forms of doubt without recourse to resources outside philosophy, such as religion or common opinion, both of which appear to be subject to question and resistant to proof: to borrow an idea from Kant, it is “morality within the limits of reason alone”.<sup>89</sup> Moral rationalists may be concerned with moral knowledge or moral truth; my concern is only with those who want to provide a rational defence against scepticism about acting in accord with moral requirements. We are not sure God exists to sanction the demands of morality, and common opinion expresses divergent moral views with equal conviction and lack of definitive support. Moral claims are not obviously true and do not command universal assent. Scepticism lurks. Moral rationalists want to appeal to the only defence we appear to have against the darkness of error, namely reason, to justify complying with morality.

We tend to feel some sense of compulsion attached to moral requirements – hence we refer to them as requirements, demands, constraints and so on. This has at times been variously attributed to fear of divine retribution, internalization of paternal authority, socialization more broadly, fear of earthly sanctions, or even, outrageously, the fact that things are as they

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<sup>89</sup> I am referring to Kant's *Religion within the limits of reason alone*, in *Religion and Rational Theology*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. George di Giovanni (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001), part of The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant.



seem and there just are certain things we have to do. Plato's thought experiment with the ring of Gyges<sup>90</sup> explores whether we would behave morally if we could be assured of getting away with behaving immorally. Those present tended to think that given half a chance we'd abandon morality and be better for it. Pending definitive proof of that, it remains reasonable to hold that at least often we conform our behaviour to moral constraints without external compulsion and with good reason.<sup>91</sup> Moral rationalists believe morality is no arbitrary code of behaviour imposed by the strong on the weak for their own convenience, but provides genuine reasons for action adherence to which, even in competition with other reasons, can be shown to be rational. The thought seems to be that if taking moral reasons seriously is not rationally defensible, then it is arbitrary or subjective, and there is no justification for compliance rather than doing whatever one wants.

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### 1.1. STATEMENT OF THE VIEW

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Moral rationalism of the kind I am here concerned with seeks to answer the question, 'Why be moral?' The question is open to interpretation. It could be a question about whether such things as moral obligations really exist or are illusory. But it could also take for granted the reality of moral demands, and be a question about morality's authority. In that case, it is recognized that morality is a genuine phenomenon providing requirements for people to act and not to act in certain ways. The question then is about the force of those requirements: with what authority does morality impose restrictions on what people do? Moral rationalism holds that there are genuine constraints placed on our actions by morality, and that it is rational to act in conformity with them – that could mean reason permits complying with morality; or that reason requires compliance, i.e. deems it the best action all things considered; and that the authority with which morality imposes constraints on action is the authority of reason. In the absence of God to endorse morality, reason might seem to be the highest authority there is: if reason dictates that we act morally, then we flout morality on pain of irrationality; if reason does not sanction acting morally then it might seem that we are without means to assess or guide action, and to have no reason to be moral. That reason sanctions morality may not motivate, but it is hoped it will justify, acting morally.

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### 1.2. MORAL RATIONALISM AND NORMATIVE MORAL THEORY

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<sup>90</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 359c-362c.

<sup>91</sup> Darwall does not think the notion of a requirement need imply threat of sanction: Stephen Darwall, *Impartial Reason* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1983), 209.

Nothing so far has been said about which normative moral theory rationalists subscribe to, and in principle they may subscribe to any or none. All that has been said is that, whatever it is that morality itself enjoins, moral rationalists regard it as rational to act in conformity with it. It may be that morality makes few demands on people – that there are few genuine duties or obligations (perhaps most good human interaction is supererogatory and morality demands only non-interference), or it may be that classical utilitarianism turns out to be a correct account of morality, in which case there are many who think it makes strenuous, even unreasonable, demands on people. Rationalists may be consequentialist (Portmore),<sup>92</sup> contractarian (Gauthier),<sup>93</sup> Kantian (Superson)<sup>94</sup> in leanings or they may have no particular normative affiliation; Plato and Aristotle may be seen as moral rationalists.<sup>95</sup> The central rationalist claim that I address is that morality provides decisive reasons for action,<sup>96</sup> sometimes phrased as the claim that what morality demands is what a person has most reason to do all things considered, and in a variety of other ways. The variety of ways in which moral rationalism is defined indicates that those who have been classed as subscribing to the view form a disparate collection. I reject one contemporary variant of the view, in strong and weak forms, yet defend what may be called a version of Platonic rationalism.

Typically, however, those moral rationalists with whom I am concerned tend to have a conception of morality, whether it matches any particular moral theory or not, which is quite demanding. This is because they tend to see morality as overriding: when considerations compete or conflict, moral ones constitute decisive reasons to act all things considered. Unless other considerations were always fairly weak, which is not thought to be the case, it must be that moral considerations are quite strong if they are to override others, and that can make life difficult. In the next chapter we shall see that some proponents of moral rationalism aim to defend a weaker version of the thesis in which morality need not always override other considerations, but in the present one I shall look at the strong version of the position. This typically holds that moral reasons always trump those of self-interest and others, and that fact can make conforming with morality difficult.<sup>97</sup> As Prichard observed, it

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<sup>92</sup> Douglas Portmore, *Commonsense Consequentialism* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>93</sup> David Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1986).

<sup>94</sup> Superson, *The Moral Skeptic*.

<sup>95</sup> The different ways of formulating what moral rationalism is are not all equivalent, and have different preoccupations and implications. Here I discuss certain contemporary representatives of the view who appear to hold a common core assumption, and it is this that I try to refute in what follows. Versions of moral rationalism that do not share this assumption are not addressed by my arguments.

<sup>96</sup> Portmore, *Commonsense Consequentialism*, 25.

<sup>97</sup> Dale Dorsey discusses in “Weak Anti-rationalism and the demands of morality”, *Nous* 46 1 2012, pp. 1-23, whether demandingness can be an objection to a moral theory. See also Michael Sobel, “The Impotence of the Demandingness Objection”, *Philosophers’ Imprint*, Vol.7, No.8, September 2007, 1-17. My point here is not to consider the implications of demandingness, if any, for any moral theory, but to address the fact that the apparent demandingness of morality, or moral theory, is seen

is when morality is felt to conflict with inclination that people are likely to question its authority.<sup>98</sup> Put another way, if morality was such that conformity would make a very slight difference to human behaviour, it could not matter much whether people comply with its requirements or not, even if it were shown to be rational to do so. But if morality is such that compliance would make a great difference to what people do, then it could matter. If it could make a big difference, then that seems to imply a discrepancy between inclination, and perhaps other sorts of reason, on the one hand, and morality on the other. Moral rationalists care about the justification of morality because they tend to think compliance makes a significant difference to what people do. They also tend to think that showing morality rationally justified adds pressure to comply.<sup>99</sup> That appears to be a psychological claim about the influence of rational justification on motivation to act. A person may doubt they have reason to do the right thing, but if such doubt could be allayed by rationally demonstrating that they have such reason, the thought may be that more confidence may be placed in doing it and temptation may be resisted.

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### 1.3. MORAL MOTIVATION

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This comes perilously close to the claim that recognition of the rationality of morality may influence, encourage, induce, provide an incentive for, motivate people to act morally. There is a tension running through the discussions of this topic between the matter of providing reasons for acting morally, which I think is the same as justifying the claim that one ought to act morally, and motivating people to act morally, which I think means generating pressure to act or even causing them to act. Rationalists are divided on whether achieving the former guarantees achieving the latter. Failure to motivate need not indicate failure to demonstrate the rationality of acting morally if motivation is a psychological matter about which philosophy has nothing to say, rather than a matter of rationality which falls within the ambit of philosophy. People don't always act on or for the reasons that they have, and we have some familiar ways of explaining why that is. On the other hand, some philosophers think that recognition of moral reasons is intrinsically motivating: Plato said one could not knowingly do wrong. There is obviously much more to be said about this; however, my

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by some philosophers as problematic, since, on the face of it, it might be difficult to defend the rationality of meeting demands considered to be excessive. If reason endorses compliance, then people who regard the demands as excessive may seek a conception of rationality, or perhaps of morality, on which compliance is not always required.

<sup>98</sup> H. A. Prichard, *Moral Writings: H A Prichard*, ed. Jim MacAdam (Oxford, Clarendon, 2002), 7-8.

<sup>99</sup> Superson says: "... we want people to be moved by the arguments we offer for acting morally, and to act accordingly." *The Moral Skeptic*, 4.

discussion will centre on whether acting rationally can be justified, but will avoid as far as possible the issue of whether or not that motivates people to act morally.

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## 2. A PRESUMPTIVE ARGUMENT FOR MORAL RATIONALISM

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It is, then, the aim of moral rationalists to show that acting as morality requires, in spite of the attractions of self-interest and other reasons, is supported by reason. Shafer-Landau offers a presumptive argument in favour of MR.<sup>100</sup> We often act in a certain way because we believe it to be right; when asked for justification, ‘Because it is right’ is often as a matter of fact accepted as a justifying answer. Moral rightness is deemed an acceptable reason for acting. It is taken in contrast with ‘Because I wanted to’, where in the former case, the assumption is that there are standards of conduct which actions may meet or fail to meet, and acting in accord with those standards is sufficient justification, while the latter makes no reference to any standards but merely to personal motivations. It would be conceptually confused, in Shafer-Landau’s view, to allow a standard to be a guide to action evaluation (‘he ought to have x-ed’) while denying it to be a reason for acting (‘I ought to x’), and it would be unfair to criticize violations of the standard while also asserting that the agent had no reason to meet it.

This argument makes a plausible case for moral rationalism, as the view that morality provides reasons for action, though it does not go so far as to show that moral reasons always override others. It gives a reason to think that moral reasons are sometimes justifying reasons for action – hence this argument provides initial support for moral rationalism broadly construed, though more would need to be said to strengthen the case for the strong form of the view. I offer it as a succinct statement of the positions I will be addressing, and also to show the difference between what I term the strong and weak versions.

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## 3. SUPERSON AND STRONG MORAL RATIONALISM

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I shall set out a case for SMR as presented by Anita Superson.<sup>101</sup> In it, she argues that rational consistency demands that one act impartially, or in her terms, without privileging oneself, and that since morality demands impartiality, the requirements of rationality and

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<sup>100</sup> Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism* (Oxford, Clarendon, 2003), 192.

<sup>101</sup> Superson, *The Moral Skeptic*.

morality coincide. She presents a particularly thorough account of how to go about defeating the moral sceptic who doubts we have reason to act morally.

Strictly, she claims to set out the terms on which scepticism about the authority of morality could be defeated, rather than to effect that defeat, i.e. she does not claim to have proved that the requirements of rationality and morality in fact coincide, but that what is needed to do so is to show that it is inconsistent, hence irrational, to privilege oneself.

Superson's SMR says it is always rational to be moral, and always irrational to be immoral. Because rationalists of this kind argue from the rationality of impartiality to the rationality of morality, which, they claim, demands impartial action, they support a stringent morality, in the sense that when moral demands vie with self-interest, acting in one's own interests is irrational. Indeed Superson aims to show that any breach of morality is irrational. This seems to have the consequence, as Portmore puts it, that even the most apparently trivial moral reason can trump considerations of any other kind, however apparently pressing, about what we have overall, or decisive, reason to do.<sup>102</sup> Superson's form of moral rationalism is more demanding than that defended by Portmore, which I shall set out in the next chapter – it is on this issue of stringency or demandingness that the two versions of rationalism differ.

More specifically, Superson aims to demonstrate to the action sceptic, who accepts that there are duties but questions whether we have reason to comply, that we always have reason to comply. Gauthier aims for that too but she rejects his dispositional rationalism, on which fostering a disposition to act morally is in a person's overall interests, because it leaves open scepticism about the rationality of each and every moral action. In addition, in order to effect a complete defeat of scepticism she also aims to show the amoralist, who accepts that she has reason to act morally but is not motivated to do so, that recognizing a reason to act morally at least *may* motivate the agent even if it does not necessarily do so (against Kantian internalism). The amoralist may remain unmotivated for psychological reasons but Superson holds that this does not threaten the rational defeat of scepticism. She further aims to refute the motive sceptic who accepts that he has reason to act morally but thinks it morally permissible to do so from a non-moral motive. She thinks this position is rationally untenable; acting rationally in her view demands doing the right thing and having the right motive. I shall concentrate on her arguments against the action sceptic, the first of these

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<sup>102</sup> Portmore, *Commonsense Consequentialism*, 40.

positions, without addressing the issues of lack of motivation to act morally or acting for other than moral motives.

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### 3.1. SUPERSON'S ARGUMENT FOR SMR

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From the foregoing it can be seen that Superson is ambitious in aiming to defeat every avenue the moral sceptic might take to cast doubt on the authority of moral reasons, and thus to show that it is always rational to comply with moral demands, and always irrational not to. Simply to show that every moral action is rational may not exclude the possibility that some immoral actions are also rational. If rationality permits but does not require moral action, then it is consistent with this that it permits an alternative to the moral action in some situations, with the result that it may be rational to act immorally. If it could sometimes be rational to act immorally, then conflict between moral and immoral actions could not be settled rationally. Since Superson wants to disallow that possibility, she aims to show that whenever morality calls for some action, any reasons not to do it, including reasons to do something else instead, are rationally defeated, and thus all immoral actions, however attractive, are rationally impermissible.

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#### 3.1.1. SELF-INTEREST BASED CONTRACTARIANISM

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Superson begins by attacking self-interest based contractarianism, a Hobbes-inspired view supported by Gauthier,<sup>103</sup> amongst others. This view responds to scepticism by offering a self-interest based defence of morality. Proponents argue that it is in agents' overall interests to agree to the contract. Agreeing to the contract requires them to adopt a disposition to meet the requirements they have agreed to. To be so disposed is to have a morally good character. Superson rejects this approach because it does not defeat the action sceptic. It is not enough to rationally justify the cultivation of a disposition to comply with the contract, i.e. being of good moral character. Superson argues that the self-interested justification for having a good moral character in this sense does not necessarily, obviously, or automatically carry over to justify every action that emanates from such character: not every such action will be in the agent's interests. If so, then it remains possible to act in a rationally unjustified way even when one has a disposition it is rational to have (taking an example from Parfit,<sup>104</sup> she says a person may develop the disposition to work hard because doing so tends to be advantageous, yet may defeat their own purposes by working to exhaustion: thus their disposition is rational but their action is not). If a rationally justified disposition can give rise to actions

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<sup>103</sup> Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement*.

<sup>104</sup> Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1984), 6, in which he describes a writer called Kate who is self-defeatingly self-interested.

which are not themselves rationally endorsed, then acting from a disposition it is rational to have may not itself be rational. So Superson thinks her task must be to show not only that it makes sense to cultivate a disposition to act morally but that doing the right thing on every single occasion is rational.

Her further reason for rejecting self-interest based contractarianism is because it calls into question whether the sceptic must be assumed to endorse the expected utility theory of practical reason (EU), that only action in one's own interests is rational. This strategy can only succeed in rationally justifying morality if it is true both that rational action is action in one's own interests and that being disposed to act morally best advances one's interests. Having argued that the latter is not necessarily true since being so disposed does not always issue in actions that further one's interests, she also expresses the suspicion that the former begs the question against morality at the outset, saying "perhaps the starting point of EU dooms us to failure".<sup>105</sup> Starting from the position that rationality can be defined as acting in self-interest, and aiming to show that morality fits in with this involves showing that moral action is always in the interest of the agent, and she regards this as empirically improbable.<sup>106</sup> Since she does not wish to give up the idea that acting morally is rational, her strategy must be to question whether rational action is as EU defines it. As Darwall observes, if considerations of non-moral kinds, in this case of self-interest, happen to dictate acting in accord with morality, this does not constitute justification of moral demands.<sup>107</sup> This could only be so if the considerations taken to justify moral demands are themselves independently and definitively justified, or we can equally ask "why be prudent?" He points out this was precisely Prichard's point in his essay,<sup>108</sup> when he said that prudential considerations may make us want to do something but do not show why we ought to. The criticism is that Gauthier's approach essentially reduces morality to rationality, and to a conception of rationality that is open to question. This raises two issues; firstly whether rationality really amounts to acting in one's own interests; and secondly, whether morality is reducible to any conception of rationality even if not this one. Superson answers the first in the negative; and regards the second as the wrong approach which she tries strenuously to avoid, though I shall argue that she falls into a similar mistake.

### 3.1.2. FEMINIST ETHICS, THE ETHICS OF CARE

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<sup>105</sup> Superson, *The Moral Skeptic*, p.36.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>107</sup> Stephen Darwall, "Autonomist internalism and the justification of morals." *Nous* Vol.24, No.2, 1990, 257ff.

<sup>108</sup> The reference is to Prichard, "Does moral philosophy rest on a mistake?", *Moral Writings*, 7-20.

Looking at other possible responses to the action sceptic, Superson turns to feminist approaches. In oversimplified terms, feminists have a complaint against the masculinity of the traditional concept of reason, exemplified in the abstract rational deliberator of EU theory. Feminists want any defence of acting morally to reinstate the role of caring both in moral reasoning and in moral motivation. Superson agrees with supporters of the feminist ethic of care that there is a need for an alternative to EU theory, to take account of the obvious fact that people do not just act from motives of self-interest but often genuinely care about others, and also that what is in people's interests often involves the good of others, especially those close to them. Their concern is that an argument for the rationality of morality based on traditional conceptions of rationality may preserve the rationality of certain wrong actions, particularly ones which wrong women, to which that conception of rationality is blind because it abstracts away features, especially those arising from the particularities of personal relationships, relevant to determining what moral obligations people have. A reductive conception of rational agency can remove too much of relevance to determining moral connections amongst people and represent relationships as transactions of a spare kind between featureless actors in a minimal environment.

Unfortunately, in her view, just recognizing the motive of care as a reason to be moral does not suffice to exclude as irrational all actions feminists regard as wrong. Certainly it calls into question the traditional opposition between self-interest and moral duty, but allowing that people are in fact motivated by care for others as well as by self-interest does not render rationally justified every action motivated by caring. Specifically, Superson notes that women are traditionally expected to care for their families in certain ways; but a woman can "care too much",<sup>109</sup> and sacrifice too many of her own needs and projects, for the sake of her family, under the pressure of a patriarchal conception of gender roles. If the sceptic were to hold that caring, rather than self-interest, defines rational action, Superson's concern is that this would still allow to be rational just those actions that treat women wrongly. It could promote the wrong kind of caring in women and encourage people to accept benefits unjustly received thereby and thus reinforce caring in the wrong way. If morality is to be shown to be rational, then neither of these conceptions of rationality will do, and what is needed is a conception of rationality that endorses the appropriate way of caring for others, as morality must commend.

The question is what conception of rationality is correct? For if the original self-interested sceptic is correct, then morality is not rational; but, evidently, if the revised 'antifeminist

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<sup>109</sup> Superson, *The Moral Skeptic*, p.51.



sceptic' is correct, then morality is still not rational.<sup>110</sup> Superson thinks neither of these conceptions of rationality is correct. The point of the exercise, for Superson, is to examine what work needs to be done to dispatch scepticism even of the most radical kind – the kind that would remain even if the traditional self-interested sceptic were dismissed. She concludes that it will not do to represent the rationalist's task as that of refuting either the self-interested sceptic or the antifeminist sceptic because some kinds of action she deems immoral will come out rational even if both of these are refuted. She needs an alternative conception of rationality, and she needs also to show it correct independently, not just that it divides moral and immoral actions where she wants it to.

Superson considers the possibility that feminists could defeat action and motive scepticism<sup>111</sup> in one move by taking an internalist stance and holding that reason dictates acting both in a caring way and from the motive of care. She thinks this would be promising if the conception of rationality in question could support caring in the right ways, but not in a patriarchal system whose distorted conception of reason perpetuates erroneous ways of caring. The feminist ethic endorses acting from the motive of care. Superson fears that if it were also to endorse some form of reasons internalism, that a person has reason to act only if motivated to do so, then it would have to allow that women whose caring motives are distorted by patriarchy have reasons to act from desires that perpetuate their oppression. For this reason, Superson thinks feminists in a patriarchal society should not endorse reasons internalism. This is a tactical rather than a philosophical reason to reject internalism, since the question must surely be whether reasons internalism is true, rather than whether accepting it furthers an agenda. Reasons internalism disallows us from saying those with distorted motives have reason to act otherwise than as they are motivated, or that they have reason to question their motivations when they are unpersuaded to do so. That view forces us to say what Superson wishes to deny, that they act rationally on their distorted motives. There is a sense of 'rational' on which they do: it is the sense of that term when it is being taken from the agent's point of view; they think they are doing the right thing, and it is rational to do what one thinks right. An equally legitimate sense of 'rational', easily distinguished in conversation from the former, is the one on which the evaluation is made from the spectator's point of view – on which, *ex hypothesi*, the person acting on what are

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<sup>110</sup> 'Antifeminist' is my word, not Superson's, and I use it for convenience only, because *ex hypothesi* this person assumes that it is women's proper role to make sacrifices for others that feminists regard as excessive – perpetuating patriarchy, as Superson puts it, by reinforcing stereotypical roles, and thus regards as rational behaviour that harms women.

<sup>111</sup> These are defined in §3 above, p.4-5. The action sceptic accepts that we have obligations but doubts we have reason to comply with them. The motive sceptic accepts that we have reason to comply with morality, but doubts that we are required to do so from a moral motive.

seen as distorted motives does not act rationally, because what they are doing is seen by the spectator as wrong.

While Superson addresses the issue of motivation to ensure a complete defeat of scepticism, my purposes do not need me to address reasons internalism further. Superson's analysis of the care ethic motivates her to reject this as a way to redefine the sceptic's conception of rational action in order to effect a vindication of moral action. Since the feminist ethic cannot defeat the sceptic by accepting both internalism and a patriarchal notion of care, she suggests an alternative might be to introduce constraints on the sorts of desire or preference that can be recognized as rational. She continues her examination of the conception of rationality that an extreme sceptic might endorse by looking at "deformed desires".

### 3.1.3. DEFORMED DESIRES – HOW THE SCEPTIC SHOULD BE RECONCEIVED

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One broad objection to the sceptic's favoured theory of practical rationality, EU, is that it takes it to be rational to maximize the satisfaction of the desires or preferences, or the advancement of the interests, of the agent. Superson has argued that if the agent has undesirable desires, unsuitable preferences or misconceives her interests, then it will not be within the ambit of the theory thus framed to exclude these as irrational. As a consequence "deformed desires" will count as legitimate reasons for action, so this theory of practical rationality allows that some actions that are contrary to moral requirements are rational. Feminists' particular worry, as we have seen, is that desires and preferences they find morally unacceptable because shaped by patriarchal values that lead to action that treat women badly, will pass this test of rationality. This is Superson's concern, though arguably it is not only cases of wrongful discrimination against women that challenge the self-interest defence, and the point could be generalized to any ill-formed preferences.

Standardly there are strategies to exclude the wrong sorts of desire so that a theory of practical reason does not deem it rational for just anyone to get just anything they want, even while it seeks to remain morally non-judgmental about what might be wrong with some preferences. "Informed desire tests" traditionally place qualifications on the kinds of desire or preference that may count as legitimate reasons for action. These qualifications typically aim to exclude desires formed without taking full information into account, or that result from faulty deliberative processes – desires a person would not have if they knew all the relevant facts and reasoned correctly. However, these constraints are inadequate to exclude all deformed desires because some such desires result from more complex causes than mere factual and logical error, or failure to take relevant factors into account. They arise, says Superson, from a deeply ingrained misconception of the value of the self of the agent, as

having intrinsic worth, and this is not a mere matter of being factually mistaken or having reasoned erroneously to a false belief about their nature as rational agents. That is, the failure is not purely cognitive, but involves the subject's emotional responsiveness and self-image, which have been conditioned within a patriarchal social milieu, and are distorted – such agents want what presumably they would not want if they had had the opportunity to develop free from warping influences and pressures. Women whose desires are deformed by patriarchy may undervalue themselves, rather than being lucidly aware of their true worth while being undervalued by others, and thus contribute to the perpetuation of the system which oppresses them. Again the point could be generalized beyond desires leading to wrongs to women: the idea is that people whose desires are ill-formed by the criteria of the test act for reasons they would not otherwise endorse, and, moral rationalists argue, also immorally.

Reflection and deliberation are not enough, according to Superson, to overcome conditioning and enable an agent to have the correct grasp of their intrinsic value as a rational agent. As suggested by Williams,<sup>112</sup> inclusion of imagination in the process of deliberation could have a favourable influence on its outcome, by enabling the agent to imagine the consequences of fulfilling various desires, even possibly to envisage what might happen if she had well-formed desires, and thus to modify what she wants in light of a fuller appreciation of its rationality; even perhaps by that route to come to appreciate her intrinsic worth. Superson approves but is doubtful about how far including imagination would take us. Certainly for Williams, as an internalist, the agent's reasons to act must connect with elements in her subjective motivational set in order to provide motivations or, according to him, it is not a reason for action, or only in a vacuous sense. Since on this view what is imagined must connect with existing motivations to provide a route to new ones, Superson thinks this addition alone is still not enough to effect the radical transformation in thinking that “dupes of patriarchy”<sup>113</sup> need to correct for desires deformed by conditioning and to provide new motivations – she thinks a person needs not just to be knowledgeable, capable of reason and imaginative, but also to be “visionary”<sup>114</sup> if she is to come to have new well-formed motivations that express a proper appreciation of her intrinsic value and her own inherently personal interests as legitimate reasons for action.

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<sup>112</sup> Bernard Williams, “Internal and External Reasons”, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981), 105.

<sup>113</sup> Superson, *The Moral Skeptic*, 81.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.* Superson does not detail the nature of this transformation in thinking. She seems to think it not a rational process at all, but I think if Superson had explored this idea she might have got closer to Murdoch's view of moral rationality, which I outline in my final chapter.

Since traditional informed desire tests identify value with the satisfaction of a person's wants, they assume a subjectivist, relativist notion of the good (a thing is good if someone wants it, rather than people wanting it because it is good). This renders legitimate desires a person under ideal conditions would not have, or want to want. On the other hand, an objective notion of the good may not be on a route that could be taken from a person's subjective motivational set to a new desire, especially if that person's desires are "deformed by patriarchy".<sup>115</sup> Superson notes that there are in any case problems with trying to formulate an objective notion of what makes a desire legitimate. Typically, attempts to define an objective test of legitimacy have required that desires be consistent, not confused, not partial, formed under ideal conditions of lucidity (i.e. in the absence of illness, insanity, intoxication, etc.) and so on. Superson says that feminists resist a test adopting such apparently objective criteria because they suspect that the criteria may express the male conception of rationality they reject. If so, these criteria could be satisfied and yet a desire still be deformed since the conditions on legitimacy will have been determined by the dominant culture and accepted by the oppressed such that the latter's autonomy is still threatened. Falling back on subjective criteria will not do, but criteria proposed as objective do not entirely answer concerns about excluding deformed desires while the criteria concerned are under suspicion of embodying a masculine bias.

Superson sees a need for a genuinely objective informed desire test, and considers a possible addendum invoking "a weak sense of objective value – one that is not morally loaded – that meets the feminist objection",<sup>116</sup> that will not allow an unfairly advantaged sector to determine what is good for people and will not beg the question in favour of morality. In working out her strategy for the defence of moral rationalism Superson has thus far adhered to the EU theory of rationality which holds that rational actions are those that satisfy the agent's preferences, in spite of its shortcomings, but now suggests amending the informed desire test such that "as a condition of rationality the agent acknowledge her intrinsic worth".<sup>117</sup> This condition entails that satisfying preferences distorted by deformed desires would be irrational because inconsistent with one's intrinsic value as a rational agent and thus it would recognize genuine interest. Superson is ultimately dissatisfied even with this modification of EU because it still involves preference-satisfaction and some of the forms of immorality she identified do not fit this description, leaving a loophole for the action sceptic. For this reason, as an alternative theory of practical rationality to which the extreme sceptic might resort, and which the moral rationalist must defeat, she proposes that the idea of

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<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

privilege rather than that of preference-satisfaction, even when modified to include only ideally rational preferences, provides the appropriate opposition to morality.

#### 3.1.4. RATIONALITY: PRIVILEGE OR SELF-INTEREST?

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To defeat the action sceptic Superson argues that the moral rationalist needs to show all immoral actions irrational. Not only self-interested actions need be immoral, and a certain sense of self is morally appropriate. All immoral acts including those other than self-interested ones in her view come under her conception of privilege. In acting immorally someone places themselves in a privileged position in relation to another, and thereby fails to respect their intrinsic worth. By taking the extreme sceptic to hold that it is rational to privilege oneself over others, rather than that it is rational to act in self-interest, to satisfy one's own preferences, if scepticism is defeated it will be so comprehensively. The assumption that it is rational to privilege oneself is, Superson says, inconsistent with recognition of one's own and others' humanity – one cannot maintain both that it is rational to privilege oneself and that it is rational to respect humanity. If the rationalist can show that rationality requires respecting people's humanity, then scepticism can be defeated by appealing to reasons of consistency, thus leaving no escape route for the sceptic through making further refinements to the idea of self-interest by means of ever more complicated informed desire tests.

The idea of privilege constitutes a better contrast with morality than does self-interest for purposes of defeating scepticism, says Superson. Since there are many sorts of wrong action other than self-interested ones, if we allow that self-interest is to be contrasted with morality we will find, she argues, that we have allowed as rational various sorts of action that we wish to demonstrate to the sceptic are irrational. These include actions, illustrated with examples, that fall broadly under four headings: those that show moral indifference, moral negligence, doing evil for its own sake, and behaviours that benefit a person indirectly through being a beneficiary of an unjust system. These four sorts of behaviour are not necessarily self-interested, yet are immoral and should be shown to be irrational if doubt about the rationality of moral action is to be fully dispelled. What all these and wrongful self-interest share is their privileging the agent and failing to acknowledge the intrinsic worth of others.

Taking privilege rather than self-interest as the opposition's idea of rationality amounts to rejecting EU, which Superson recognizes may present a problem. If we accept a modified form of EU, as suggested earlier, then we retain the idea that the sceptic accepts a theory of rational action based on preference-satisfaction, on which acting on those preferences that

pass her modified informed desire test is rational. However, even if the modified informed desire test excludes the preferences she wants it to, and she suspects that it may not, this does not cover every kind of immorality and particularly the last of the four types of non-self-interested immorality listed in the previous paragraph, behaviours whereby people benefit indirectly from systemic injustice, because these are not instances of preference-satisfaction. One reason they are not is because they are not actions, which might be taken to mean the question either of their rationality or of their morality does not arise, and that Superson is mistaken in seeking to rationally exclude this sort of situation. Superson may have in mind that receiving benefit as a side-effect of unfair social arrangements raises possibilities for people to act, omission to do which is itself subject to moral, and rational, appraisal. She does not say this,<sup>118</sup> and she includes them because she wants a maximally thorough defeat of action scepticism, as it certainly will be if it can indeed show such cases irrational, if it is allowed that they are immoral. A sceptic might otherwise argue that there is nothing irrational about taking advantage of windfalls, so to speak. Since Superson regards doing so as morally unacceptable she wants therefore to show it irrational, but on EU cannot do so. On the other hand, if she proceeds with her suggestion and rejects EU in favour of a wider conception of the sceptic's position grounded in privilege, then, while she may be more comprehensive in her defeat if she succeeds, she has given herself the task of challenging a sceptic who espouses a heterodox notion of rational action.

If the sceptic is indifferent to rationality altogether, or incapable of appreciating reasons, then we lose the problem we started with, which was that of trying to show someone willing and able to be rational that moral action is supported by reasons. There are no rational means to convince a sceptic who does not recognize any form of rationality, but nor is there any need to do so, since it could be no victory for rationality.<sup>119</sup> So we must represent the sceptic as at least amenable to reason. But if we reject EU as a theory of practical rationality because it does not capture the irrationality of some immoral behaviours, notably benefitting from systemic injustice, then what conception of rational action do we represent the sceptic as holding?

Superson argues that we should understand the extreme sceptic as being amenable to reason, but as starting from the position that it is rational to privilege oneself in relation to others. This sceptic is committed to acting rationally, and also to the view that privileging oneself is rational. Specifically, that includes regarding as rational those forms of immorality Superson

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<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 116-7: her discussion concludes that the moral status of such non-actions should be decided on a case-by case basis.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

describes as wrong yet not self-interested –moral indifference, moral negligence, doing evil for its own sake, and benefitting from systemic injustice. This sceptic claims to be ready to be shown that moral action is rational, but from her present position, thinks that would involve showing that moral action privileges the agent. Superson is willing to engage with this sceptic to try and show that it is her conception of rational action that is mistaken. Really what rationality requires is that we afford equal respect to all rational agents. This is inconsistent with the view that it is rational to privilege oneself. Since respecting rational agents equally is just what morality requires, it is rational to be moral.

### 3.1.5. RATIONALITY, AGENCY, CONSISTENCY, IMPARTIALITY

To replace EU, a Hobbesian idea about rational action, Superson argues for a Kantian notion of the rationality of action, based on the very idea of agency. Something like expected utility theory has been invoked by many philosophers in the project of defeating scepticism, including Hume, Bentham and, amongst contemporaries, Gauthier. The problem for rationalism has been that even on a modified version of EU, on which the satisfaction of desires is rational, some deformed desires still pass as rational, and it lacks the resources to deem irrational any immoral behaviour that isn't an expression of any preference. Superson adds that a moral theory generated by what passes the test of rationality on EU can only be a minimalist one of noninterference, rather than incorporating positive duties such as taking into account others' needs, so EU simply fails to defeat scepticism because it fails to endorse the rationality of positive moral actions. Further, such a morality regards other people as instrumental to agents' ends, rather than as having intrinsic value.

Superson suggested earlier that such a starting point begs the question against morality,<sup>120</sup> so she is aware that any alternative view of rationality “should not beg the question in favour of morality by assuming at the outset that the sceptic endorses moral reasons, but should compete with morality.”<sup>121</sup> She thinks her idea of privilege overcomes the difficulties of EU without sacrificing the good features,<sup>122</sup> in particular that it does not beg the question in favour of morality when trying to show morality to be rational.<sup>123</sup> If we take the sceptic to regard it as rational to “privilege oneself vis-à-vis morality” by advantaging oneself in a variety of ways that go beyond self-interest, the “moralist has to show that rationality requires taking the worth of others to give one a reason not to privilege oneself.”<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

A strategy that parallels the self-interest based defence of moral rationality by grounding moral reasons in reasons of privilege is not an option. That would concede to the sceptic that it is rational to privilege oneself, when Superson wants to show that privilege opposes morality, and is the best description of the immoralities she wishes to show irrational. Privileging oneself “displays an inconsistency in treating the humanity of self and others” and involves “caring negatively about others’ humanity by either rendering it void or discounting it, not caring about others’ humanity, not being aware of others’ humanity by failing to focus on it and succumbing to emotion instead, or even enjoying undeserved benefits from an unjust system”<sup>125</sup> – which fall under her generic immoralities mentioned earlier.

Instead, she suggests, “One promising alternative to the model of EU and self-interest is that of consistency”.<sup>126</sup> Her suggestion is that by assuming that a modified sceptic understands the basic laws of logic, including the principle of consistency, we can appeal to reasons of consistency in our attempt to defeat him. What must be shown is that “rationality requires, on grounds of the principle of consistency, that we not disrespect others’ humanity; it is inconsistent in the sense of being contradictory, and so irrational, not to respect others fully, but to respect one’s own humanity and to expect that others do so as well.”<sup>127</sup>

Here she appeals to “Kant’s notion of humanity.”<sup>128</sup> Many philosophers, she notes, maintain that a moral theory must be internally consistent, and must include a principle of impartiality, whereby it requires that all in its domain are treated equally in certain respects. The respects in question appear to be their desires, needs and interests – the fact of having these places people, beings, within the moral domain as suitable subjects and objects of moral consideration. Impartiality requires that “no special preference be given to one’s self or one’s family or friends or special group in determining the course of right conduct.”<sup>129</sup> Impartiality is interpreted in a variety of ways, and there are those, for example amongst care ethicists already mentioned, who reject impartiality altogether, regarding partiality – caring for people in ways driven by who they are – as the better moral principle. Superson rejects this because she thinks it allows features people have by luck to determine what duties people have, which to her seems unfair. She finds it “ironic” that care ethicists are partialists

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<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*



and yet regard it as wrong to disfavour people on grounds of the contingent feature of gender.<sup>130</sup>

Of the familiar interpretations of impartiality, Superson favours a Kantian version over the sort inspired by Bentham, who said that a being's sentience, its ability to experience pleasure and pain, places it within the ambit of moral consideration as having an equal right with all others to figure in calculations of utility,<sup>131</sup> everybody to count for one and none more than one.<sup>132</sup> Kant's version in her view better explains why each person counts. This presents impartiality as a rational requirement of respect for humanity, where by 'humanity' is understood 'rational agency'. The concept of the rational agent is of a conscious being capable of both reason and action – action requires choosing amongst alternatives, and choosing requires reason. Each rational agent has intrinsic worth in virtue of their capacity to reason and their freedom to act. This constitutes them an end in itself, an originator of action, a legislator for all in the kingdom of such ends. Impartiality to Kant involves the recognition by each such legislator of each of the others as constituting a limit to their will: if any one's proposed maxim of action cannot rationally survive universalization, then no member of the kingdom of ends could rationally will to act on that maxim, could will such a maxim to be incorporated into the moral law. To respect humanity is to have regard for other rational agents in one's deliberations and actions – I cannot rationally will to do what I cannot will that all do.

Superson expands the idea of humanity along lines taken by Thomson, Darwall and Korsgaard whom she quotes with approval, to include individuality, by which she means that each person has particular desires, interests, goals and plans, and these features are "the facts about humanity"<sup>133</sup> which all persons have in common yet which distinguish each person from others (presumably by their unique contents). From Darwall she takes the idea that these features also give every such person "the same standing to make claims and demands of each other and to hold one another accountable."<sup>134</sup> Superson sees these facts about humanity as a basis for being prepared to give reasons for our ends and actions, and the fact of our being prepared to give reasons as constituting both our accountability to others and our authority to make claims.

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<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, eds J. Burns and H.L.A. Hart (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1970), XVII.4, footnote.

<sup>132</sup> This phrase attributed to Bentham by John Stuart Mill in *Utilitarianism* (London, Fontana Press, 1962), ch.5, 319.

<sup>133</sup> Superson, *The Moral Skeptic*, 100.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

Given this understanding of respect for humanity, forms of immorality are subsumed under her concept of privilege as being ways of failing to take account of the facts about the humanity of others – failing to give equal weight to their interests, or reasons, and giving one’s own interests, or reasons, greater weight – making one’s own interests count for more than those of others: this, she notes, is just what Kant means by “arrogance”<sup>135</sup> – ignoring, discounting, not caring about or failing to focus on another’s humanity and thereby favouring one’s own. In Superson’s view this discrepancy between regard for one’s own worth and that of others shows inconsistency: the sense of consistency she sees herself as invoking is that of equality, and the respect in which interests are equal is in the fact of, or the manner of, their figuring in agents’ deliberations; she says, “An agent’s taking a privileged stance toward morality and others displays an inconsistent regard for the agent’s own worth and that of others”, and the rationalist’s task is “to show that it is rationally required or at least permitted because consistent to respect the humanity of others, that is, to have the reasons for their ends and actions count equally to the agent’s own.”<sup>136</sup>

In short, morality requires impartiality, which is having equal regard for the interests and reasons of self and others, and rationality requires consistency, which is giving equal weight to the reasons and interests of self and others. Superson anticipates a difficulty with interpretation of the principle of consistency. If she is taken to claim that the person who privileges himself is inconsistent because he treats his own humanity as worth more than the humanity of others, when consistency requires giving equal weight to the humanity of each, then the sceptic who privileges himself could escape the charge of inconsistency by replying that he regards it as rational for each to privilege himself and this gives each person the same status from their own point of view, and is therefore consistent. She notes that this parallels the charge of inconsistency commonly made against the individual egoist and the diffusion of that charge by the reply of the universal egoist. So, the sceptic can say, privilege is consistent, and rational.

Superson replies that the inconsistency committed by the sceptic is a violation of *impartiality*, and not, as construed by the objector, a violation of *universalizability*. The latter conception involves holding that one’s own good gives one a reason to act, and universalizing it to the proposition that each person’s own good gives them a reason to act. According to Superson, this is consistent according to universalizability but does not escape the charge of violating impartiality, because that requires that each should treat everyone’s

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<sup>135</sup> He discusses this in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* in *Anthropology, History and Education*, ed. Robert Louden, trans. Gunter Zöllner (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011), part of the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant.

<sup>136</sup> Superson, *The Moral Skeptic*, 105.

worth equally. Acting only on one's own reasons, even if done by each, universalizes privileging oneself, and fails to take any account, let alone equal account, of any other person in one's deliberations, and therefore cannot be said to be impartial, even if it passes as consistent in the sense of expecting everyone to privilege themselves.

The constraint of impartiality is thought of as a moral one, she says; whereas the constraint of universalizability is a rational one: "We do not think of the dictates of rationality as being impartial".<sup>137</sup> She continues, "It would be interesting to explore why we have such different takes on morality and rationality, and I think that an attempt to defeat scepticism that invoked reasons of consistency as I am suggesting should do so. I am not going to conjecture any answers since my goal in this book is not to defeat scepticism but merely to set out the terms under which a complete and satisfactory account should be given. I merely want to suggest that reasons of consistency promise to be better than reasons of self-interest for grounding the rationality of acting in morally required ways."<sup>138</sup>

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## 4. PROBLEMS FOR STRONG MORAL RATIONALISM

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### 4.1. THE SCEPTIC'S VIEW OF PRACTICAL RATIONALITY

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The reason Superson thought it necessary to redefine the sceptic was because she wanted to exclude all immorality from rationality, and include all moral actions. The sceptic took it that it is rational to act in self-interest. However, if that is right, then some moral actions are not rational and some immoral actions are – at least on Superson's understanding of these. Rather than immediately reject the widely held view of rationality that the sceptic endorses, namely EU, which simply fails to make the requisite divide between moral and immoral actions, Superson considers the possibility that a modified version might suffice for her purpose. This would render her defeat of scepticism, her defence of moral rationalism, acceptable to those who favour that view of rationality, not just the traditional sceptic but also other rationalists.

Her problem though, is that even the modified version allows some behaviour that she considers immoral to count as rational. In order to get the results she wants she needs a different conception of rationality to rule out the right set of immoral actions. But Superson

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<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

has also to be clear which actions are moral and which are immoral, since otherwise it will be impossible to make any general judgment as to the rationality of morality. In her view sexist actions, amongst others, are immoral, something that she thinks the prevailing ethos is at best equivocal about. But not all sexist actions, not all immoral actions, are aptly described as self-interested. Rather, she claims, the feature they share is that they privilege the agent over other people. So she set up her sceptic to hold that rational action is action that privileges the agent. If that sceptic can be defeated then the defeat is comprehensive, which is to say, a genuine victory for morality as she sees it.

Having chosen to depart somewhat from a popular view of the nature of rationality, by representing the sceptic as adhering to the idea that it is rational to privilege oneself, her task then is to convince its supporters and everyone else that a better conception of practical reason is that of respecting people's intrinsic worth. She then has to show that on this conception of rational action all moral action turns out to be rational and all immoral action to be irrational.

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#### 4.2. THE STRATEGY FOR DEFEAT

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Is she right that EU is not the best theory of practical reason? Her main reason for rejecting it is that it does not exclude immoral actions, particularly some sexist actions, from being rational, in part because it embodies a conception of rationality distorted by masculine bias. Anyone who does not agree with all of her moral judgments, and some of her moral judgments are at odds with those of people whom she regards as sexist, may not feel pressure to review that conception of rationality. Equally, even if one agrees with her moral judgments, this may seem illegitimate as a strategy. She gives morality priority, and is prepared to change the conception of the rational to fit it. But those who favour EU, and others, can and perhaps do disagree on the immorality of the actions Superson wishes to exclude from rationality – she thinks that at least one form of immorality is to disregard the humanity of others while believing what one is doing is right.<sup>139</sup> It seems there is a possibility here of a moral disagreement that could affect the success of her project. This is especially so for those who take a contractarian approach, which aims to establish a moral

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<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 107. I think it could be hard to make a case for the wrongness of acting wrongly believing it right – that itself as a wrong over and above the wrong of doing what is in fact wrong. At least often people do not do wrong knowing it wrong, and when one knows it wrong, one does not believe it right. If it is wrong to act as one thinks right when one is mistaken, how shall we judge how to proceed? What is wrong is to do wrong, only there is rarely consensus, which is the next best thing to proof, that a thing is right or wrong. Consequently we can only ever at best act as we think right, hoping it is, knowing it may not be. To deem it wrong to do wrong believing it right is a mark of the stringency of her morality, to be discussed in ch.3.

code that all can agree to on the assumption that people agree to whatever is in their overall interests. Contractarians start from the assumption that rationality is acting in one's own interests, and fix their moral code by reference to it. They have been willing to accept as morally right just what EU allows to be rational. Superson appears to be using the same strategy but reversing the order of priority.

Both contractarians and Superson could be asked: which conception of practical reason is correct? Which actions are moral? How is this established? Contractarians might reply that morality just is what rationality endorses, by definition. Others might want them to justify that strategy in light of the fact that in life we appear to work with a conception of morality that looks free-standing, in that we do not establish what is rational before we make moral judgments, and may disagree on judgments both of rationality and of morality, and on whether some moral action is rational or some rational action is moral. That conception of morality is richer, as Superson recognizes, than such a strategy appears capable of yielding. If there is some sense in which it is incorrect, it is not shown so by arbitrarily adopting a conception of rationality on which some of its judgments are automatically ruled wrong.

They might also want contractarians to offer an independent justification of their idea of practical reason before going on to see what morality it generates, and more importantly, whether what can thus be generated would be a morality at all. That EU is widely accepted is no justification.<sup>140</sup> Superson notes that it is favoured for being a successful predictor of actual behavior;<sup>141</sup> that falls far short of its being a theory of practical reason whatever that might be. She also says that critics object that it does not describe actual practical reasoning, which might be one function of a theory of practical reason, nor can people's values be inferred from actual choices. Much depends on whether preferences, and interests, are understood subjectively, or objectively, and that is a big discussion, as hinted at above. Since it is a big discussion, it seems fair to say it is neither *a priori* clear nor established to the satisfaction of all that acting in self-interest is the defining feature of rational action; it is not something we need accept on pain of irrationality; other conceptions are available – for example: that acting rationally is taking the means to one's ends; acting for the interests of the community, or the majority; acting for good (enough) reasons; acting for the sake of the good; doing what makes sense; that what counts as acting rationally depends on why one needs to decide whether an action is or is not rational, and these will differ amongst cases. These are not necessarily mutually exclusive. An obvious counterexample to EU must surely

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<sup>140</sup> It is widely accepted by academics with certain interests; it is not even known about by most people in the world who nonetheless have conceptions of rationality and morality which cannot be dismissed out of hand without begging the question in favour of this conception of rationality.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

be that people commonly do not regard acts of selflessness as irrational, and might be puzzled and indignant at any suggestion that they are. People can be wrong, but this is an issue of the use of a word, and an appropriate conception of correctness goes with it – some natural, non-technical uses must also be right and this example of a common use of ‘rational’ is a legitimate use of the word. Self-interest is one amongst co-existing conceptions of rationality. This suggests it is arbitrarily stipulative to insist that self-interest, or privilege, or respect for rational agency, is the correct conception and that the others are wrong.

On the other hand, and Superson seems to think this, it seems fair to think that the project of moral rationalism must start by assuming that rationality and morality can be defined independently of each other, and that actions can be independently categorized as rational or moral, and must hope that the two will coincide. Yet self-interest based contractarians define morality in terms of rationality, and it is not clear Superson’s attempt to avoid defining rationality in terms of morality succeeds.

Whether that is fair to Superson depends on the success of her argument about “consistency”, which she hopes will yield the defeat of scepticism. She is aware that the self-interest based contractarian approach seems to beg the question against morality by ruling out moral desires and preferences as rational reasons for action – seeing these as in direct contrast with self-interested ones. She rightly seeks to avoid making the opposite error of begging the question in favour of morality by importing moral assumptions into her conception of rationality. But it is not clear she succeeds. I shall consider this in the next sections.

#### 4.2.1. PRIVILEGE AND WHAT PRACTICAL REASON REQUIRES

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Superson has argued for replacing EU with privilege, the view that it is rational to favour one’s own reasons over those of others, as the theory of practical reason the sceptic holds and the moralist must refute. Having persuaded us that this is a plausible theory of practical reason, since the sceptic must be a reasonable person, she must now argue that, nevertheless, it is not correct. Privilege in Superson’s view is preferable to EU as a conception of practical rationality because it “covers a greater variety of behaviours in which people do in fact engage”, and “allows for the case that sometimes morality should *not* demand that we act against our self-interest” thus allowing for morality “to require that we act in self-interested ways when doing so is self-respecting.” Now, “the moralist has to show that rationality requires taking the worth of others to give one a reason not to privilege oneself... privileging

oneself, or in some cases being privileged by the system, displays an inconsistency in treating the humanity of self and others.”<sup>142</sup>

The sceptic’s position is “backed by reason in the sense that it requires understanding the basic laws of logic, including the principle of consistency.” We should, she says, be able to appeal to a rational person on grounds of consistency to reject privilege (even though such a person takes privilege as *prima facie* rational, and we have been persuaded that this makes sense). She wants to show that “it is inconsistent in the sense of being contradictory, and so irrational, not to respect others fully, but to respect one’s own humanity and to expect that others do so as well.”

The inconsistency, or contradiction, seems to be that the sceptic respects himself but does not respect others, when, to be consistent, evidently, he should treat others as he treats himself. Arguably there is no inconsistency in treating everyone in the same way but not respecting anyone. Just claiming that he should treat all in the same way does not say anything about how he should treat people. So there are two issues to settle: what practical rationality requires of someone, and whether it requires they treat self and others in the same way – more specifically, whether rationality requires that one respect humanity, and whether that involves treating everyone in the same way.

The sceptic however is someone who *ex hypothesi* respects his own humanity. If respecting humanity involves treating all humans the same, as Superson claims, then it cannot be true that the sceptic’s behaviour is a genuine case of respecting humanity, since we are told he treats himself differently. On the other hand, if he can genuinely respect his own humanity yet treat others differently, then respecting humanity does not entail treating everyone the same and it requires further argument to show that rationality, or the concept of humanity, requires this. That said, if we accept that the sceptic favours himself, and disfavors others, there is a difference between his treatment of himself and others, and that might be construed as an inconsistency – unless, as Superson notes, a legitimate reason can be offered to ground the difference. Superson thinks that in general there can be no such reason and this seems *prima facie* a plausible claim – it seems to belong with our notions of fairness and justice that we treat people the same unless there is good reason not to (although there often is good reason not to); however, fairness and justice are moral notions, and Superson appears to be trying to reach them from rationality via consistency, and it is not clear the gap is quite bridged.

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<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

It is one thing to claim that it is contradictory to respect one's own humanity but not that of others, and this is how Superson portrays the behaviour of the sceptic. It is a further claim that it is contradictory "to expect that others do so as well."<sup>143</sup> That does not seem to help Superson's project; nothing has so far been said about how the sceptic expects others to act, and what others do is not what the sceptic does, nor therefore, can it have a bearing on his rationality. His *expectation* that others will favour him may be grounded in experience – perhaps others just do favour him; or it may be a vain hope, in which case, that his expectation does not match his evidence entitles us to wonder about the quality of his thinking; I don't know if we call it a contradiction to expect something to happen on the basis of no evidence or evidence to the contrary. Or it may be that the sceptic believes other people *ought* to favour him over others and perhaps even over themselves. In that case we seem to be discussing the rationality of the view that people ought to favour the sceptic over others; but until now the sceptic's view was that it was rational for him to favour himself, and that is a quite different position. Given that he regards favouring himself as rational, rather than merely as a personal policy regardless of rationality, which I think is to say, he regards it as governed by norms applicable to a population rather than being the expression of a gratuitous personal choice, the logical conclusion of that for how other people should act depends on how he understands this. It could be as, 'It is rational to favour me', or as 'It is rational to favour oneself', and these seem to have different implications concerning his expectations of others.

Superson recognizes this, as she discusses the difference between the individual egoist and the universal egoist. The former believes that a person's own interests give him reasons for action but other people's interests do not give him reasons. Nagel puts it thus: "Egoism holds that each individual's reasons for acting and possible motivations for acting, must arise from his own interests and desires, however those interests may be defined."<sup>144</sup> Superson says an inconsistency or contradiction is involved in that, unless the egoist can explain why only his desires give reasons. She adds that the "problem with individual egoism is that it cannot explain how a characteristic such as the fact of promoting one's self-interest serves as a reason for one person but not for another. That is, individual egoism takes it that one's own desires or good give(s) one reasons, but denies that the desires or good of others give(s) one reasons. There is an inconsistency, or a contradiction, involved here, unless the egoist can explain what is so special about the one person that only her desires give her reasons." That is multiply ambiguous.

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<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992), 84.



#### 4.2.2. THE INDIVIDUAL EGOIST - AT LEAST TWO READINGS

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a) It could just be a fact that a person takes his own interests and not other people's as reasons to act, but that does not obviously involve any inconsistencies or contradictions. It is hard to know in general terms how, and to what extent, any person may be thought to know the desires and interests and good of unspecified others. It clearly cannot be that each knows everything about all, because it is impossible; equally, it would be odd if someone knew nothing of some others' desires and good, since it must be difficult to live amongst others and not have an inkling of how things are with some of them some of the time; though a depressed person, to take just one example, might be like that for a time. Then the question is how far these facts about other people, when they are known to an agent, play a part in this agent's reasons for action, and how far they ought to. I am aware of no general way of answering this. But if a person in fact acts only in ways that promote her own interests and not in ways that promote others' interests, when she does or could know about these, it is still not at all clear that this person is inconsistent: certainly we observe a difference in her treatment of interests, taken collectively – those that are her own give her reasons to act, and those that are not hers do not. But as yet it is not clear what rule of reason is breached that constitutes this an inconsistency rather than a mere difference.

It is not clear why “the fact of promoting one's self-interest” should be taken impersonally, without the owner's name on it, so to speak; i.e. why desires and good (as in the good of this person and that person) should be taken as items in the pool of facts that constitutes the set, ‘reasons for action’, and why the members of that set, reasons, should be doled out amongst agents impersonally, or why agents should regard some members of the set as to be chosen by them – on what principle of distribution or choice? That is what Superson seems to imply when she expresses puzzlement as to why others' desires, interests and good do not count for an agent as his reasons for action. Put that way, it is much more puzzling why they should; it is like expecting every parent to raise somebody else's child. When they do, it must be either instrumentally to the agent's own good, or for their own sake, and Superson herself defends the idea that there is no presumption that all actions of every agent should exclusively be for the good of others, which would be as odd if not odder than that none is. What remains is the fact that people do in fact discriminate amongst ‘reasons’, whether on any principle or not is not clear, nor whether there is a correct rational principle, nor how that would be established, and hence the division that the individual egoist makes between his own and others' may or may not be reasonable, rational, consistent or whimsical. As yet I see nothing that entails

that acting solely on interests that are one's own is either consistent or inconsistent with any rule or requirement of rationality.

Since others' interests and good cannot practically be someone's sole reasons for acting, and it is rather hard to imagine what it would be like if someone's own interests and good really were their sole reasons for acting (how far can we take this thought experiment?), it must follow that if and when someone acts for the sake of interests, their own or someone else's, there must be some reason why they do when they do. There must be a host of such reasons. Without further explanation, it is difficult to know what is being imagined and why it should be puzzling, and this suggests to me that much in the background, about morality and about rationality, is being assumed to be agreed by participants in the debate but is not actually agreed, and that this significantly affects their perceptions of what is at stake in the debate. I shall say more about this at the end of this chapter, and elaborate on that in chapter 6.

b) Alternatively, the sceptic is of the view that he *ought* to take only his own interests as reasons, and not other people's; this involves a further ambiguity.

i) Perhaps he means that he *ought* to act only in his own interests, without regard for the interests of others, but makes no judgment about what others ought to do. It is difficult to understand the force of 'ought' here; it sounds normative (though at this point let us not make assumptions as to which normative domain is appealed to), which would seem to entail a standard applicable to a population, but perhaps it is just possible to suppose that he thinks something imposes a requirement on him, as on no-one else, to act in this way – say a divine command, or a diabolical one, issued personally to him, or a self-imposed edict. I see no contradiction or inconsistency in this. Perhaps Superson would count being in receipt of a divine command as a reason to make an exception, but it is not obvious that he is making an exception, since it is not clear to me that there is a norm that applies to him that the command excuses him from. Someone who acts because they believe they are under a peculiar constraint does not necessarily have views on how other people ought to behave, nor that there are norms other people ought to adhere to, nor that all are under the same norms, and it may or may not be a fact that other people are subject to other norms or none or to special personal orders from whatever source; so the fact that his treatment of himself differs from his treatment of them, and from their treatment of themselves and of other people, does not necessarily indicate a departure, still less an illicit one, from either his personal rules or any that may apply to him externally, if such exist.

ii) Perhaps he means that everybody else *ought* to act only for reasons of his self-interest and not theirs. If a deity or a despot commanded that all should act in the interests of one, then perhaps we would indeed obey. This would parallel the previous case when the special treatment might be a difference but not an inconsistency because it does not break a rule and is sanctioned by authority. Nevertheless, perhaps this is the case Superson has in mind when she says it is inconsistent. If we were under orders, then Superson might regard this as a reason to treat one person in a special way. But the reason she regards doing so as an exception is because she sees a presumption of equal treatment in the absence of this reason to do otherwise; if so, the sceptic's behaviour, lacking such special reasons, could constitute a form of inconsistency. Whether the presumption is justified depends on what Superson makes of the idea of humanity, and I shall discuss this further below.

A further difficulty with this interpretation, however, is that it does not appear to represent the sceptic's position: the sceptic was said to privilege himself and not to take others' interests into account, but it seems a stretch to say that involved his thinking that rationality required that all people privilege him and don't take their own or each other's interests into account. Not only is this rather different from the position we thought he took, but it would be hard to sustain the claim that this is a rational position for the simple reason that it is eccentric and has never been claimed by anybody, and would not be accepted by anyone, as far as I am aware. It does not appear to follow from any already accepted truths, is far from self-evident, and goes against the facts of human life as we know it; the unphilosophical understanding of rational action is action for a good reason. We were supposed to be able to accept the sceptic's position as at least plausibly rational, but this version is not. Superson does indeed want to show that it is not rational but she did want it to be plausible. In any case, the problem with this does not appear to be inconsistency but peculiarity. Perhaps the two are conceptually related, since both involve some notion of oddity which can only have meaning against a background of something else with which it contrasts, i.e. is different from, and hence, possibly inconsistent with. But there are differences and differences.

One might imagine God sending his son into the world and making it known in the usual way, through prophets or angels, that we the world are to honour his son above all others. This puts the most appealing gloss I can think of on a claim that otherwise looks as though it would come from a narcissist or a megalomaniac, and suggests that

it could be a recognizable position, in the right conditions, but in the absence of these special circumstances, which are not being invoked, the claim looks very peculiar. So we might call it irrational, and we might call it weird. I don't think there is an oracle we can consult on which of those it is to be – these are legitimate uses of language. But it does not look inconsistent with anything, unless we take it as inconsistent with what usually happens. We could take it that way; but there is no rational requirement to do what is usually done.

c) The third possibility is that the sceptic means that *each* person ought to act in their own interests, which, Superson concedes, appears to be a logically tenable position. At least this interpretation has superficial plausibility and is sometimes actually put forward as the sensible way to behave. This just is the position of the universal egoist but he was supposed to be different from the individual egoist. This principle has the difficulty, Superson notes, that if each acts in their own interests, each may thereby compromise the interests of others. This may not bother them in their capacity as an agent but could bother them in their capacity as one of the others; that is unfortunate but not inconsistent.

It is not clear to me which of these is the position of the individual egoist. Superson seems to equivocate between a), b(i) and b(ii), and regards whichever it is as inconsistent, though as I have said, I don't see any inconsistencies or logical contradictions in the interpretations I can think of. However, because individual egoism is in Superson's view susceptible to the charge of inconsistency, she aims to refute the sceptic who adopts universal egoism, position c) above, i.e. that each person can, rationally, privilege themselves.

#### 4.2.3. THE UNIVERSAL EGOIST – TWO READINGS

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Having dismissed individual egoism, whatever she understands that position to be, Superson says the other way of seeing privilege, that survives this objection, can be understood in two ways: firstly, the sceptic who adopts universal egoism thinks we all have the same worth but favours reasons of his own worth over reasons of others' worth. Alternatively, and this is the reading Superson ascribes to the sceptic, "the privileged person takes it that he has more worth than others – his worth counts for more – and this is why he can favour his reasons over others'".<sup>145</sup> On her account, "privileging involves not regarding others as equal in worth by discounting ... their humanity".<sup>146</sup> While the sceptic construed in the first way, as a universal egoist, can escape the inconsistency charge by claiming that each person's good gives them a reason to act, in her view he cannot escape it on the second reading. This is

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<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

because, on the first reading, the sense of consistency invoked is that of *universalizability*. The universal egoist can consistently universalize his principle of acting for reasons of his own worth and not other people's, such that each person does this. The sceptic who privileges himself in the second way, by thinking he has more worth than others, can be charged with inconsistency, this time in the sense of violating *impartiality*. Taking himself as having not equal worth but more worth than others is inconsistent in the sense of being partial.

Superson believes that rationality demands, on grounds of consistency, that we each treat all people as having equal worth, and that involves counting their interests equally as reasons for action. If so, this happily coincides with what morality demands, and so it must be rational to be moral. The sceptic can be charged with inconsistency in the sense of being partial because he treats himself as having greater worth than others, discounting their worth as a reason for action relative to his own. She is however aware that what she says here is not enough to defeat scepticism.

If rationality allows that, while we all have equal worth, whatever it means to have worth and to have the same amount of it as everyone else, it is still rationally acceptable to act only for the sake of one's own worth and not for that of others, as the universal egoist does, then this does not appear to coincide with what, according to Superson, morality demands. Morality, evidently, demands acting for the sake not only of one's own worth but also for the sake of others' worth. The sceptic who privileges himself does not do that; he acts rationally, but not morally. If this sceptic is right about what rationality requires, then it is not true that it requires the same of us as morality does. The sceptic who says rationality rules that we all have the same worth but each can take his own worth, and not other people's, as providing exclusive reasons for him to act, can evidently do so consistently, in the sense that his view is universalizable. He has not been rebutted.

Superson however turns to another reading of the sceptic's position. This sceptic does not think we all have the same worth; rather, he thinks "his worth counts for more"<sup>147</sup> than other people's. The charge of inconsistency against this sceptic can, in her view, be sustained. This is because he breaches impartiality rather than universalizability. This is a breach of morality, whereas failure of universalizability is a breach of rationality. The problem for Superson is that, if we accept this interpretation, the second sceptic may be being immoral, but is not being irrational. The first has not been rebutted, but the second has not either. That

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<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

he is partial, if he is, and that this is an inconsistency, if it is, does not show that he is irrational because the inconsistency is a moral one and not a rational one. So after all, it may be rational to be partial, and it may be rational to be immoral.

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### 4.3. TWO QUESTIONS

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There are two questions I would like to raise about this. First, could not the universal egoist, the first construction on ‘privilege’, be charged with partiality, even while consistent on universalizability? For while he takes all as equal in worth, he disregards others’ worth in his practical reasoning – he does not regard others’ worth or humanity as a reason for him to act. That could be said to be favouring himself unduly – being partial. Indeed, what does his ‘taking others as equal in worth’ amount to, if he does not treat them in the same way as himself? Is it his mere willingness to pay lip service to a supposed principle of practical reason? Or is it that he holds the view that the principle does not imply treating those of equal worth in the same way? Perhaps he would argue that having equal worth concerns people’s value as human or rational beings and this does not imply treating people in the same way, indeed might imply treating each person differently as their unique features and circumstances require. Perhaps he would argue that even if rationality rules that agents are of equal worth, nothing follows rationally about what he ought to do – that any injunction about what he should actually do is a matter of morality and not rationality.

Second, on the other hand could not the sceptic, on the second construction of ‘privilege’, consistently universalize his principle? He takes himself as worth more than others; could not each rationally take themselves as worth more than others? Even if there is a fact of the matter about the worth of human beings, and the fact is that all have worth and have equal worth, as Superson has claimed, this would not necessarily be incompatible with each being most important to himself and taking importance to oneself as a reason for action. It has not been shown that actual worth is and perceived worth is not a legitimate reason for action. There seems no logical difference in terms of universalizability between accepting that we all have equal worth and yet taking only one’s own worth as a reason for action and believing we have differential worth and taking only one’s own worth as one’s reason for action.<sup>148</sup> Either could universalize the principle that each act for reasons of their importance to themselves. Consequentially speaking, it might turn out that we all do better on that principle, favouring ourselves and our nearest and dearest and leaving the rest to do the

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<sup>148</sup> This would appear to apply whether one thought one’s own worth greater or lesser than that of others.

same. Construing it to be rational to do what turns out best, which seems to be a sense in use though by no means exclusively, treating oneself as more important would seem to be both universalizable and rational. That would render partiality rational.<sup>149</sup> It need not do so without qualification – legitimizing partiality in specified circumstances, such as, only when it will make things turn out best, but if it can do so at all then Superson would have to say more than she has to convince us that partiality as she understands it is inconsistent hence irrational. I am not sure Superson has been able to extract from the concept of humanity the conceptions of consistency, impartiality and equal worth that she wants.

Superson says, “The point I am making is a more general one about morality and rationality. Many of us think of the dictates of morality as impartial, and as universalizable. But many of us think of the dictates of rationality only as universalizable – certainly the egoist or ... sceptic can say they are. We do not think of the dictates of rationality as impartial; indeed EU requires favouring the satisfaction of one’s own desires over those of another. It would be interesting to explore why we have such different takes on morality and rationality, and I think that an attempt to defeat scepticism that invoked reasons of consistency as I am suggesting should do so.”<sup>150</sup>

If the foregoing is correct, both conceptions of privilege appear to be universalizable, and both appear to be partial. The question is whether there is any form of rational inconsistency in being partial. We might allow that partiality can be a form of inconsistency and that treating people impartially is treating people ‘in the same way’. But this does not help Superson’s argument unless impartiality is a wholly non-moral concept which does not seem to be the case. It seems to be at least in part a moral concept; perhaps it is hybrid; but perhaps purely moral, or a hybrid involving all sorts of value – a judgment as to whether some differential treatment is legitimate, where what would count as legitimate depends on the circumstances. The charge against partiality as a kind of inconsistency is that there is an impropriety in differentiating amongst people in one’s actions. If that is a breach of reason considered apart from morality, if one can make any sense of that, the charge is that impartiality rationally requires one to treat people in the same way: but that would appear to be a statement about the meaning of the word. We may be happy to accept this as a statement of what impartiality requires, but we are not always required, whether by rationality or by morality, to be impartial, and when we are, what that involves in the way of action is not always the same – or, put another way, we have to judge when to treat people

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<sup>149</sup> Provided there were consensus on, or a fact about, what the best outcome is – a rather major proviso.

<sup>150</sup> Superson, *The Moral Skeptic*, p.124-5.

the same and what constitutes ‘the same treatment’. In context we can sometimes take that for granted, because we have culture and history, and, at other times, we may debate or negotiate – as a matter to be decided, not something that a general specification lays down in advance.

Superson accepts that sometimes acting in self-interest is self-respecting; this is one way of treating oneself differently from others, and she maintains it is not always illegitimate. That is to claim a legitimate reason for difference, and if it seems uncontroversial, as to many it will, it must be that she herself is reading ‘impartiality’ with built-in exclusion clauses which we implicitly share – self-interest is inconsistent except when it’s consistent. There is no serious objection to taking care of one’s own, and not setting the dinner table for 7 billion. When differentiation counts as legitimate – fair or just – and when it does not is a moral judgment. There is nothing in the concept of impartiality that tells us how and when to apply it: it is the concept of treating people in the same way *when that is called for*, of not favouring anyone *unduly*. These judgments do not appear to be possible without reference to morality: they are paradigmatic moral judgments. Formally we know what impartiality requires, but to give it content requires moral discrimination.

As Mill puts it, “Impartiality, in short, as an obligation of justice, may be said to mean, being exclusively influenced by the considerations which it is supposed ought to influence the particular case in hand; and resisting the solicitation of any motives which prompt to conduct different from what those considerations would dictate.”<sup>151</sup> As Polemarchus put it, of justice, it is “giving to each his due”.<sup>152</sup> All the work is done off page, outside the words. Nothing as yet has shown that we must not treat each other differently; only that we must not do so inappropriately, without a good reason – but what counts as a good reason has not been specified, nor what counts as the same or equal treatment, and how could they be, in the abstract? And if they could, we’d have no moral thinking to do, for it would all have been done for us in advance – we could carry our sample book in our pockets like a colour chart and match the situation to the sample and know exactly what to do. Life would hold no surprises, and we wouldn’t need to live it.

So, it is not obvious that being partial is a species of inconsistency, but even if it were, or, when it is, it seems to be a moral inconsistency and not a rational one, and it does not appear to be invariably wrong. Therefore, as yet the sceptic is undefeated, as Superson is aware.

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<sup>151</sup> Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ed. Mary Warnock (Fontana, 1962), ch.V, 300.

<sup>152</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 331e.



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#### 4.4. HUMANITY, IMPARTIALITY, RATIONALITY AND MORALITY

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It is one thing to ask if an action is rational, and another to ask if it is moral. If we want to know if an action is morally right, that kind of concern is of a different kind from concern over whether it is rational. The two may coincide; it may even be the case that sometimes one cannot decide if an action is morally right unless rational, or rational unless morally right. The two kinds of concern have different implications – relevant reactive attitudes will be different, the meaning in our life will be different. Perhaps there is overlap in these between the two kinds of judgment, one may regret irrationality or immorality, but, for example, one does not feel remorse for having been irrational, one cannot feel pride for having done the right thing – at least, this is different from pride at having been rational. Indeed, one time it may be important to work out if someone has been rational rather than, or as well as, appraising them morally, is when we want to make a judgment about whether some terrible thing they have done was done responsibly, or otherwise: were they lucid or confused, sane or sick, angry or stupid? Our answer, and we may not be able to answer, may have implications for how we understand the deed, the person, the repercussions, humanity, and how we should respond.

We may ask ourselves, in deliberation, ‘what does morality demand of us here?’ and, in order to explore that – to amplify our understanding of our human situation – we may additionally ask ourselves, ‘what does rationality demand?’ We may not ask both questions, but it can be revealing to do so. The latter question, in the context, may make apparent what other considerations, besides moral ones, are operative, and what their significance is. We imagine how we might act if the moral considerations were absent – we conduct a thought experiment. So it may be that rationality would demand protecting one’s interests, costing the least amount of money, finishing in the shortest time, being as safe as possible, taking a risk, attracting the most attention, or the least, conserving non-replaceable resources, being creatively original, etc. These may conflict and we may decide to sacrifice convenience for economy or originality for impact. But when we bring morality back into view, we may see what it will mean if we do that, or that we cannot do it. Thus we assess what morality costs us, and what flouting it costs us. So when Superson says it would be interesting to explore why we have such different “takes” on rationality and morality, I find it puzzling, because they seem to be two different categories of evaluation. I see no reason why we should expect the two concepts to have identical implications. It is interesting that they are not wholly separate, and Superson seems to see that, but that tends to suggest that her project cannot succeed since it depends on their independence.

Superson hopes that impartiality involves a notion of rational consistency derived from the concept of humanity and hence that acting morally must also be rational. She takes humanity to mean rational agency – human beings have the capacity to reason which enables us to acquire true beliefs and decide how to act. Action can be or fail to be justified by reasons. We could start by asking: what does practical reason require of people, of human beings, of rational beings, or of whatever category answers to rationality? If there were an answer to that, then it would specify ways in which all members of the class are, each member of the class is, rationally required to act. In that sense, its requirements would be universal. I am with Superson in doubting that acting in self-interest is that specification – not that this is never rational, but that not only this is rational and sometimes it isn't. But I am not with her in thinking that a definition of rationality can get us very far in circumscribing a set of actions so that we will see that it includes moral actions and excludes immoral ones. So I doubt that the idea of humanity, however conceived, or any conception of rationality, can do for Superson what self-interest cannot. In her view the idea of humanity, which she reads as rational agency, has certain rational entailments that can be filled out in ways that show it to be inconsistent with the privileged person's understanding of rationality's dictates; the privileged person is mistaken about practical rationality. She thinks that being a rational agent involves having reasons for action, and that this fact rationally entails respecting other agents, which in turn entails giving their reasons for action equal weight with one's own in deliberating on what to do. Even if one allowed this much, there is the issue of how far that gets us in rationally justifying morality. Superson assumes a particular way of giving equal weight which is, in my view, beyond the definition and imports moral value. It may often be rational to be moral, but must it necessarily be so?

Superson says: "Many moral philosophers take as one mark of a moral theory that it must be consistent in its main tenets, one of which requires that it be impartial in the sense that it acknowledges that all persons are equal in certain respects..."<sup>153</sup> Of course a theory must be internally consistent; it cannot rest on contradictory assumptions or require acting on contradictory principles. So is impartiality a requirement of rationality, or a requirement of morality? Superson seems to slide between the two, and at times seems to think that impartiality is a requirement of a different sort, at a different level we might say, from actual moral requirements at the level of 'Give back what you borrow' or 'Don't let people down'. She calls it a tenet of a moral theory; but this is rather vague. Her way of talking about impartiality suggests she sees it as at a remove from actual moral requirements, as a constraint on what a moral requirement can be, or on what moral requirements there can be;

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<sup>153</sup> Superson, *The Moral Skeptic*, 99.

a sort of meta-ethical constraint. She is not alone in this; utilitarians treat the idea that each is to count for one and none for more than one as somehow outside the actual moral requirements generated by the principle of utility, as a condition on the application of the principle. Moral philosophers of other persuasions too display a tendency to treat impartiality as not quite a substantive moral requirement but as what is sometimes called a formal requirement on morality. But whether doing so is legitimate is not clear: whether treating everyone the same can be deduced from some undisputed non-moral premise, follows from some assertion about sentience, happiness, humanity or whatever is thought basic to moral theory, or is simply such an incontestable basis for morality that it itself need not be questioned. Those who want a reason to be moral may also want a reason to be impartial. As yet I don't think one has been given.

Superson hopes a requirement of impartiality emerges from analysis of the concept of humanity, as entailing equal treatment for beings falling under the concept. It is not clear that that concept contains the idea of equal treatment. One might say that any instance of a concept must be responded to as being an instance of the concept, or there is nothing to show that any concept has been recognized as being instantiated; so with human beings, our many ways of interacting with instances of the concept, people, reveal what we understand by the concept. As yet, I cannot get from that a rational requirement of equal treatment: what I get is that our in fact unequal treatment of each other is constrained by the particularities of our mutual responsiveness which differ in multifarious ways from those of our responsiveness to other items, and tells me that when we treat people unequally, we do that in a way we don't treat other items unequally, because we recognize humans as humans equally.<sup>154</sup> That is not the sort of equality Superson wants to get from the concept of humanity, but I think she wants more than it contains.

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## 5. THE UNDEFEATED SCEPTIC

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Superson is clearly aware of these problems, and for that reason does not go as far as actually claiming that impartiality is a rational requirement and that the sceptic can therefore be defeated by being shown to be partial, hence irrational. Rather, she diverts to the notion of consistency as possibly holding the answer to the sceptic, but without showing that it

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<sup>154</sup> Sometimes 'instances of the concept' human are not responded to as might be thought equally, as when it is said that they have been treated like animals, or like objects. It might be replied that they are being responded to as humans, and being abused as humans, since those who so treat them do not respond to animals or to objects in precisely the way they respond to these humans whom they mistreat.

actually does. As a result, Superson doesn't defeat scepticism – although it should be noted her declared aim was to present what would have to be done to defeat it rather than actually doing so. Her final suggestion is that this might be effected on grounds of consistency rather than through a self-interest based defence of morality. She stops short of delivering the final blow to scepticism – in effect, she stops when she catches up with Sidgwick at the impasse he called “the dualism of practical reason”<sup>155</sup> – at the unbridgeable gulf between egoism, or non-morality, and morality; between acting for non-moral reasons and acting for moral ones. One wonders why she did not just set about the work directly; and what remains to be discovered about ‘consistency’ that cannot be presented immediately. Thus far, she avoids begging the question in favour of morality, the mistake she sees as comparable to the egoist's of begging the question against morality, but at the cost of not achieving the defeat she would like.

Superson has been unable to rationally justify acting morally when self-interest or privilege conflicts with an alternative conception of rationality based on the Kantian idea of humanity. However, it may not just be that this conception of rationality has failed but also that there is reason to doubt that any morally neutral conception of rationality can show moral reasons always defeat other reasons for action. It has not been shown that rationality endorses every moral action and opposes every immoral action. Enter the weak moral rationalist, who defends the rationality of acting morally while at the same time conceding that sometimes it is rational to act contrary to moral considerations and maintains that “an agent can be morally required to perform a given act only if she has decisive reason... to perform that act.”<sup>156</sup> In the next chapter I shall consider Portmore's attempt to defend a weaker version of the claim that it is rational to be moral, on which not every immoral action is rationally overruled.

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<sup>155</sup> Henry Sidgwick, *Methods of Ethics, British Philosophy: 1600-1900* (Past Masters database, Charlottesville, Va: Intelix Corporation, 1995), Preface to 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, x.

<sup>156</sup> Portmore, *Commonsense Consequentialism*, 25.

## CHAPTER 3 – WEAK MORAL RATIONALISM

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### SUMMARY

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Superson aimed to vindicate acting morally against sceptical doubt. She defended the idea that moral obligations can be shown rationally overriding by showing compliance to be required by the concept of rational agency. I have argued that her project of showing moral reasons always overriding on rational grounds is unlikely to succeed. This does not close the possibility that a weaker form of moral rationalism may still be correct, one that denies the total rational overridingness of moral considerations while preserving the rationality of meeting moral demands. Douglas Portmore argues against the supremacy of morality for a weaker version of moral rationalism which allows that we sometimes have sufficient reason, all things considered, to act contrary to what we have most moral reason to do.<sup>157</sup> He argues that this is implied by the conceptual connection between blame and wrongdoing combined with a claim about the connection between blame and irrationality. If, as I argue, his argument does not succeed, because he fails to detach blameworthiness from moral wrongdoing and reattach it to rational error, then moral rationalism remains unproven. A possible consequence is that anti-rationalism may turn out to be true, but an attempt by Dale Dorsey<sup>158</sup> to refute Portmore's view and persuade us of the plausibility of a weak anti-rationalist position does not succeed. There remains the instrumental defence of acting morally, and in the next chapter I will look at Prichard's attack on that.

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4. Dorsey's criticism of Portmore

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<sup>157</sup> Douglas Portmore, *Commonsense Consequentialism: Wherein Morality Meets Rationality*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press 2011).

<sup>158</sup> Dale Dorsey, "Against the Supremacy of Morality", draft of 03/30/12, <http://people.ku.edu/~ddorsey/supremacy.pdf> accessed 28/08/2014.

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6. How can it be morally wrong to act rationally?

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## 1. DEMANDINGNESS

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A rather different objection to strong moral rationalism from those discussed in the previous chapter is that, if Superson's answer to the sceptic succeeds, then by redefining the sceptic's position she has argued us into a morally tight corner: she has shown that rationality demands as much of us as morality, and that both demand much more of us than we might have hoped, or even, perhaps, than we have strength to give were we willing to do so. If Gauthier and others are right that morality coincides with self-interest, then at least if it is demanding it also pays to rise to those demands, whereas if Superson is right to reject the self-interest defence, there may be uncompensated costs to being moral, and these may be high. It might be answered that morality just is demanding, and that rationality is demanding, and that is why moral reasons are decisive – because rationality shows they are more demanding than other reasons, and that might be because other sorts of reason, especially self-interest, cannot demand but can only recommend. Superson, or someone, might explain the demandingness of morality in terms of human weakness – were we less akratic, less vicious even, morality would come more easily to us – that its apparent demandingness is inversely proportional to the stage of moral development we have attained, and as we become more virtuous, we find morality less difficult. How easy should doing the right thing, doing anything, be? How attuned to our nature, and our inclinations?

Alternatively, she might give an answer grounded in her Kantian conception of impartiality. Although she does not expound that with the intention of meeting this sort of objection, she does in fact argue that morality does not entail the kind of self-negation that it is often thought to involve, for example by those who resist moralizing pressures to moral sainthood,<sup>159</sup> and it is just this worry that grounds the demandingness objection to some moral theories. Nevertheless, at the same time as defending the view that agents can legitimately act in self-interest, and in a self-respecting way, it is clear that her conception of morality remains very demanding, for example, even going so far as to impute immorality to doing wrong believing it right, and to those who benefit from systemic injustice, which occurs by default rather than from positive action.

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<sup>159</sup> Notably Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints", *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol.79, No.8 (Aug 1982), 419-439.

In this chapter I shall set out a case made by Douglas Portmore for a weaker version of moral rationalism designed to meet the demandingness objection.<sup>160</sup> That objection is most often levelled at act consequentialism because that theory unqualified yields preposterously demanding moral verdicts. Portmore wishes to preserve what he sees as the good in consequentialism, namely its consequentialism, while rejecting its “counterintuitive implications”<sup>161</sup> and to argue for a modified form of act consequentialism. He thinks strong moral rationalism requires the rejection of traditional act consequentialism, but, perhaps surprisingly, that a weaker form of rationalism entails a modified consequentialism. His strategy therefore is to argue for a weak form of moral rationalism, which, together with a certain conception of practical reasons, entails the version of act consequentialism he prefers. I am not here interested in a defence of any particular moral theory, but in his case for weak moral rationalism, which I set out below, and in whether, through being less ambitious than Superson’s, it can avoid the problems I identified.

## 2. PORTMORE’S ARGUMENT FOR WEAK MORAL RATIONALISM

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Douglas Portmore makes a “presumptive case for moral rationalism”<sup>162</sup> – presumptive, he says, in that he doesn’t attempt to refute all counterarguments, although he believes it coheres well with the overall picture of morality, rationality and the relation between the two that he offers. Essentially, he argues that those who reject moral rationalism are committed also to rejecting an intuitively plausible premise. The success of his argument depends on how serious it is to reject that premise – some may regard the implications of such denial as an acceptable cost of denying moral rationalism. It is possible that in spite of its claimed plausibility, the premise just isn’t true, and cannot therefore support moral rationalism, which does not of itself entail the falsity of that thesis, but only that this argument for it does not succeed.

Portmore presents moral rationalism (MR) as “the view that agents can be morally required to do only what they have decisive reason to do, all things considered”.<sup>163</sup> Already this sounds a little different from other versions, especially Superson’s which I discussed in the previous chapter, suggesting limitations on fulfilling moral requirements; many people

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<sup>160</sup> Portmore, *Commonsense Consequentialism*.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

might think that there can be no constraints on fulfilling moral requirements – they might wonder, ‘when is it wrong to do what’s right?’. To clarify, Portmore explicitly distinguishes his version of MR from two other forms of the view which he labels MO and RP respectively. He says that MO asserts the moral overridingness of moral reasons, and RP asserts the reason-providing nature of moral reasons.<sup>164</sup> He states the views as follows:

**MO:** If S has more moral reason to perform x than to perform y, then S is not morally permitted to perform y. And thus, if S has most moral reason to x, then S is morally required to x.<sup>165</sup>

**RP:** The fact that S is morally required to x constitutes (and, thus, provides) an overriding (and, hence, decisive) reason for S to x.<sup>166</sup>

The two look very similar, and I’m not sure if there is a difference, or if so, that it matters, either for Portmore or for me, or for Stephen Darwall and David Brink,<sup>167</sup> who, according to Portmore, both think of MR as RP.<sup>168</sup> Both are versions of what can be termed ‘the overridingness thesis’ and both are rejected by Portmore in favour of his version of MR.

According to Portmore, MO is the assertion that moral reasons are more important than other kinds of reason and where present, they determine what a person ought, all things considered, to do. It appears to mean that moral reasons are such that, when competing with other sorts of reason which commend other actions, they will always be the reason to act on. The implication seems to be that there is no need to consider other reasons when moral reasons are present. He rejects this – he thinks it implausible, because it means that no modification of other sorts of reason can have any effect on the overall judgment of what to do, which will remain that the agent must act on their moral reasons, however trivial, no matter how important the other reasons.

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<sup>164</sup> Note that as Portmore formulates it, the RP thesis does not state merely that moral considerations provide reasons for action, but also that they provide overriding reasons.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>167</sup> Stephen Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability*, (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2006). David Brink, “Kantian Rationalism: Inescapability, Authority, and Supremacy”, in *Ethics and Practical Reason*, eds G. Cullity and B. Gaut (New York, Oxford University Press, 1997), 255–291.

<sup>168</sup> Many writers do not make the distinctions Portmore makes here, and think of moral rationalism just as the view that moral reasons override other reasons, which might be MO. Portmore’s distinctions here show why not every formulation of the thesis may have the same implications, and for that reason my arguments against Superson and Portmore may not apply to everyone who under some formulation could be called a moral rationalist.



RP is the assertion that being morally required to act in a certain way is itself an overriding reason to act in that way. Portmore attributes the latter interpretation of MR to Darwall, who espoused rationalism, and to Brink, who rejects rationalism because he rejects what he sees as the entailed supremacy thesis (that moral reasons are rationally overriding).<sup>169</sup> Portmore thinks the thesis these two writers think of as MR is not equivalent to his understanding of MR because he thinks it is possible to accept that there is always decisive reason to act as morally required (MR) yet deny that moral requirements provide agents with overriding reasons for action (RP). The reason he gives for this is: “The fact that S is morally required to x may indicate that there are certain sorts of reasons to x that are indeed decisive, but the fact that S is morally required to x does not itself constitute an additional reason, let alone a decisive one, for S to x.”<sup>170</sup>

That is, S’s being morally required to x can sometimes show that S has decisive reason to x, but the fact of being morally required to x is not itself a reason to x. Portmore evidently thinks Darwall and Brink think that ‘being morally required’ is itself a reason, and an overriding one. He distinguishes this from MO which says moral reasons determine what one ought all things considered to do, which is to say that it is those reasons, amongst all the reasons, which carry most weight. Portmore objects to RP because he thinks that being morally required can sometimes mean one must x all things considered, but one never has to x just because x is *morally* required, over and above the reasons one has to x which happen to be moral. To illustrate: one may be morally required to help a friend because it is kind; but one is not required to help a friend because the reason to do it, that it is kind, is a moral one; hence, even when helping a friend is what one must all things considered do, it is never the case that one must all things considered help a friend because the reason for doing so is a moral one; it will be because the reason for doing so, its being kind, is the weightiest of one’s reasons.

This could be a distinction without a difference – the reason why helping a friend is the weightiest reason is not incidentally related to its being a moral reason. Its overridingness may be internally related to its being a moral reason, and it may be that moral reasons always override because of the sorts of reason they are, i.e. that the sorts of actions prescribed by morality are such that they will override others. We could say it is their being overriding that identifies them as moral (it certainly isn’t a feature they bear as actions, because as Prichard said, there is no feature common to moral actions). Perhaps moral

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<sup>169</sup> David Brink “A puzzle about the rational authority of morality” *Philosophical Perspectives*, Vol. 6, Ethics, 1992.

<sup>170</sup> Portmore, *Commonsense Consequentialism*, 41.

reasons are the sort of reasons that override others, i.e. are those reasons that are the most important, whatever the internal features of the actions they dictate. Treating a sensitive creature gently has nothing in common with doling out goodies fairly or withdrawing privileges from a recalcitrant rule-breaker or forbearing to retaliate for a slight, but all of these actions share the feature of overridingness: whatever other reasons for acting a person has, they cannot omit to act in these ways in favour of them (given that *ex hypothesi* we are to suppose them to be in conflict such that whichever action is done rules out alternatives, rather than allowing, say, their postponement, which would signify that there is no real conflict because both could be done).

However, Portmore thinks there is a difference between these interpretations of MR, and his own, and concludes: “So although some may be compelled to accept MR because they think that moral requirements generate overriding reasons to abide by them, others, like myself, may be driven to accept MR because they think that morality is limited in what it can require of us – that morality can require us to do only that which we have decisive reasons to do all things considered.”<sup>171</sup> He thinks the stronger versions implausible because he finds it fairly uncontroversial that “in many instances, we have sufficient reason, all things considered, to act contrary to what we have most moral reason to do”,<sup>172</sup> yet he still constructs some examples to persuade the doubtful. I discuss these later, but to return to the outline of his argument: if we can sometimes have sound reason to give priority to non-moral reasons, then it cannot be maintained that moral reasons are, as some rationalists claim, “rationally overriding”.<sup>173</sup> That is the position for which Superson argued, which I have termed strong moral rationalism. He concludes that MR cannot be equated with the view that morality is rationally overriding.

Having distinguished his position from these two strong versions of MR, he proceeds to put his presumptive argument for his weaker version.<sup>174</sup> This maintains that there are many sorts of reason for acting and no kind of reason of itself is more important than any other; he thinks it a good feature that this version leaves open the possibility “that non-moral reasons can prevent moral reasons from generating moral requirements”, and that this makes it “nearly unassailable”.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-44.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

His presumptive argument for moral rationalism is set out as follows (his numbering, his xs and phis, my paraphrase):

**2.10** If S is morally required to x, then S would be blameworthy for, in full knowledge, not doing x.

**2.11** S would be blameworthy for phi-ing in full knowledge only if S lacks sufficient reason to phi.

**2.12** So, if S is morally required to x, then S lacks sufficient reason not to x. (From 2.10 and 2.11).

**2.13** If S lacks sufficient reason not to x, then S has decisive reason to x.

**2.14** Therefore, if S is morally required to x, then S has decisive reason to x (From 2.12 and 2.13. This is moral rationalism).

I am using the ‘in full knowledge’ clause as shorthand for Portmore’s rather longer locution designed to exclude both actions done in ignorance of all the relevant facts, and actions not performed freely, that is, without the sort of control over actions that makes one “an appropriate candidate for praise or blame”<sup>176</sup> for performing the action.<sup>177</sup> Portmore explains that having “decisive reason” to do x means “that S’s reasons are such as to make S objectively rationally required” to do x; and that to say that S has “sufficient reason” to do x is to say that S’s reasons to do x are such as to make S “objectively rationally permitted” to do x.

The argument appears to be valid, and all premises but 2.11 appear to be, as Portmore terms them, “conceptual truths”. 2.10, he explains, is intended to express the conceptual connection between wrongdoing and blame. 2.11 is the “intuitively plausible”<sup>178</sup> premise he thinks opponents of weak rationalism would have to deny.

To strengthen the case for 2.11, Portmore provides an argument based on assumptions he thinks even more plausible than it.<sup>179</sup> These assumptions aim to support the conclusion 2.11 essentially encapsulates: that it is inappropriate to blame someone for doing what rationality

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<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>177</sup> Whether that knowledge includes knowledge of the obligation the agent is under, or, if this is different, just full factual knowledge, is not clear: Portmore explicitly states that it must include knowledge of all the relevant facts, which are those ignorance of which would either inculpate or exculpate the agent for doing x. It could be asked whether it is possible, and if so what it means for responsibility, for a person to know all the relevant facts yet not know they are under an obligation and which obligation it is. As far as I can tell, the answer would make a difference to identifying who is blameworthy, but the structure of the argument remains the same.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>179</sup> On p.48-9 he sets out a formal argument for 2.11. I render relevant points in my own words here.

allows.<sup>180</sup> He argues that people are potentially blameworthy only when they are capable of responding appropriately to reasons.<sup>181</sup> Having sufficient reason to do something is to be “objectively rationally permitted”<sup>182</sup> to do it; or as I would put it, to have a good enough reason to do it. Having reasons which permit an action just is being rationally justified in so acting. If a person is blameworthy only if they can respond appropriately to reasons, they cannot be blameworthy when correctly exercising this capacity and acting as they have sufficient reason to act. Since, he says, sometimes other reasons than moral ones can be sufficient, and since blame accrues only when an appropriately qualified person does what they lack sufficient reason to do, it would be perverse to blame them. This would be to blame them for doing what the correct use of their faculties showed to be permissible. That is, reason directs that some action may be done; when responsible people thinking clearly see that and act accordingly, they act in full knowledge rationally doing what reason allows. Since sometimes reason directs that non-moral reasons override moral ones, this means rational people in full knowledge and responsibility guided by sound sense will decline to comply with morality in order to do what reason allows, and it would be perverse to blame them for so doing.

Portmore thinks the assumptions he adduces, and his illustrative examples, plausible. I find them implausible. Let’s look at them.

### 3. CRITIQUE OF PORTMORE’S ARGUMENT

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2.10 tells us that not doing what morality demands is one thing that is blameworthy; 2.11 tells us that blame accrues only for actions that are rationally disallowed. It follows that not doing what morality demands is disallowed by reason; that looks like 2.12 which infers that if morally required to do something then it is rationally impermissible not to do it. 2.13 tells us that if it is rationally impermissible not to do something then doing it is rationally required, and 2.14 concludes that if a thing is morally required then it is rationally required, which is moral rationalism.

Portmore accepts 2.10 as a conceptual truth, and I find that unproblematic, but in the next section I shall discuss Dorsey’s disagreement with Portmore on this point. The burden of the

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<sup>180</sup> We might say, for ‘acting reasonably’, but in this argument acting reasonably, and having sufficient reason for acting seem to come apart, and that is the issue.

<sup>181</sup> This is my rendering of 2.17, the 3<sup>rd</sup> premise in his argument for 2.11, on p.48.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

argument is on the “intuitively plausible” premise 2.11. It states that agents are blameworthy only for doing in full knowledge what they don’t have sufficient reason to do (when their reasons aren’t good enough to make it rationally permissible). If they have sufficient reason for an action, i.e. if reason permits it, they are not blameworthy for doing it.<sup>183</sup> When an action is the most sensible all things considered, then they certainly have sufficient reason, so, if 2.11 is true, they should not be blamed for doing it. Only if they don’t have sufficient reason can they be blamed. But perhaps they are not always blameworthy even then. But one time they can be blamed is for moral wrong, so moral wrong must be against reason.

2.11 encompasses blame for moral wrongdoing and more besides: people are blameworthy only for doing things rationality does not sanction. So since 2.10 says that one blameable thing is moral wrong, it seems to follow that moral wrong is one thing rationality does not sanction. However, 2.11 allows that other things may be blameable too: the feature shared by blameable things is their being barred by reason, though it is possible that not everything barred by reason is blameable. Not everything barred by rationality need be blameable but if a thing is blameable, it is barred by rationality. Moral wrong is blameable, so moral wrong is barred by reason.

What we don’t know is what other things reason does not sanction. It cannot be true that the only thing rationality excludes is moral wrong, and it might even turn out, for all we yet know apart from this argument and if anti-rationalism is true, that it does not exclude moral wrong at all. What it most obviously excludes is erroneous reasoning, theoretical or practical, but which other things are contrary to reason may not be something about which interesting generalization is possible. If reason bars folly, as may appear to be analytic, 2.11 does not rule out that blame accrues for acting foolishly; but blame does not obviously accrue for acting foolishly. 2.10 asserts a conceptual connection between blame and moral wrong; one may question that, but argument would be needed to claim that people are blameworthy for contravening reason. At least often they are not. For example, it may be that a certain investment is obviously (to a weather eye) a very bad one; yet someone may refuse to listen to reason, invest and predictably lose all their money.<sup>184</sup> They may have been foolish, but they are not necessarily blameworthy. 2.11 as stated does not exclude that possibility, although it does not entail it – it says people are blameworthy only if they contravene reason, but not whenever they do. But if it is a fact that, of all the things reason bars, the only one for which they are blameworthy is moral wrong, then why not say so? If

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<sup>183</sup> This is premise 2.20 in his argument for 2.11 on page 49.

<sup>184</sup> It has been suggested that this may be immoral as well as irrational; I discuss this further in §3.2 below.

that were true, it would be an odd thing to give the impression that there might be other blameworthy things besides those that are, simply, morally wrong. On the other hand, if other things besides moral wrongs are blameworthy, and as a matter of fact all those things have in common that they contravene reason, yet still not everything that contravenes reason is blameworthy, then we are left wondering what it is about a thing that attracts blame, if it isn't simply being morally wrong, or simply being against reason. Especially if we don't yet know for sure that what is morally impermissible is also rationally impermissible.

2.11 has the peculiar feature of detaching blame from moral wrong, an idea with which we are familiar, and reattaching it to the contravention of reason, for no very obvious reason. Rather than being intuitively plausible, it is not immediately apparent whether it is true or false, because it widens the range of cases that might now qualify for blame without further specification; it does not close down enough possibilities – we are not sure what sort of actions those are for which there is insufficient reason, they could be indefinitely various. It is not obvious, especially because, at least in this argument, it appears to be suggested that moral wrong is blameworthy, when it is, just because on those occasions there is insufficient reason to so act, rather than, as we thought, because it is wrong. It seemed reasonable to think that blame attaches to moral wrongdoing (indeed Portmore says as much in 2.10); we are now told that it attaches to not having sufficient reason, rather than exclusively to moral wrong. That comes as news to me. It is not obvious to me that blame attaches to irrationality, the most obvious way of having insufficient reason for something, and I'm having to ponder whether it attaches to any other kind of action, but if any actions other than moral wrongs are blameworthy, then evidently they will share the feature of being contrary to reason. Not being immediately certain which things are contrary to reason, not even whether moral wrong is amongst them, far from being intuitively plausible, the claim provokes a resounding, 'Hold on I need to think about that'.

Portmore wants us to accept that rationality sometimes permits contravention of moral reasons, and that when acting rationally yet not morally we ought not to be blamed if doing what makes most sense. This is why he wants to detach blame from moral wrong – so that there can be times when moral wrong does not incur blame. Put that way, we are almost ready to sign up to it, because we are aware that sometimes it is inappropriate to blame people for moral wrongs. The question is whether those cases include all the cases Portmore wants, those where a person “has sufficient reason” not to heed moral reasons. Clearly they include cases where a person is not deemed responsible for their action because of youth, mental incapacity, coercion; and cases where they are responsible but there are extenuating circumstances which excuse them. But do we include amongst the cases of moral wrong for

which blame is inappropriate some in which we think the person acted rationally in contravening morality?

Portmore's argument depends on the assumption that it is plausible that blame is only appropriate when a person does what they don't have a good enough reason to do (2.11). I find I am able to doubt this; that is, it is not at all clear to me that 2.11 is even "intuitively plausible" and I doubt its truth. I do not find that I can rule out in advance the possibility that a person may be blameworthy even when they had sufficient reason for acting. Not only is it not obvious to me that one is only blameworthy for that which contravenes reason, I can't tell whether it is true that if one does have sufficient reason for doing something, then one is not blameworthy.<sup>185</sup> Maybe one can have a good enough reason to do something and still justly be blamed. I don't know. I suspect the reason I don't know is because it is not possible, because not useful, to generalize. For all I know, there may be principled reasons why consensus on what counts as sufficient reason may not be reached on any given occasion and if so, it may be that judgments of blameworthiness are not dependent on judgments of the sufficiency of reasons, or that the latter is relevant but not decisive, some thinking that in spite of having sufficient reason blame accrues, and others not, in those cases. The discussion of the value-laden nature of judgment in chapter 6 will hint at some such reasons.

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### 3.1. A PLAUSIBLE EXAMPLE?

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To strengthen the plausibility of 2.11 Portmore devises some examples to elicit our intuitions about the relative importance of moral and self-interested reasons. The following one is intended to reveal his intuitions about blameworthiness in the absence of a decisive reason<sup>186</sup>: he has promised to meet a student to discuss his exam grade, but has the *unique* opportunity to make some extra money by giving a lecture instead. He is offered enough money to give him just as much reason, all things considered, to give the lecture as to meet the student as promised. This equates, in his terminology, to his having sufficient reason to meet the student, and sufficient reason to give the lecture. We are to assume him to be appropriately responsive to reasons, so that he always does what he has decisive reason to do, only does what he has sufficient reason to do and chooses arbitrarily when there is a tie

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<sup>185</sup> Portmore's premise 2.20, mentioned above, p.49.

<sup>186</sup> I discuss this particular example from p.49 at length because it is his main support for the plausibility of 2.11 of his formal argument; he discusses others as putative counterexamples and rejects them. All are in my view implausible. Below I discuss the implications of another, weighted more heavily towards favouring self-interest, designed to illustrate the implications of 2.11 for reactive attitudes.

between sufficient reasons, so here he chooses arbitrarily to give the lecture. He asks, “Given my flawless execution of my capacity for sound practical reasoning, how can I be faulted for breaking my promise? Is it not inappropriate to hold me morally responsible and, thus, potentially blameworthy in virtue of my capacity for being guided by sound practical reasoning and then blame me for acting as sound practical reasoning leads me to act?”

How very odd. I find it hard to believe Portmore would break a commitment to a student for the sake of the – apparently not overriding – attractions of earning some extra money by giving an impromptu lecture. I don’t think he would be surprised if, on next meeting the student, the latter’s resentment at having been let down without notice was apparent. I doubt it would surprise him that offering an explanation at this point, if he deems that much to be required – not an apology, since having sufficient reason to disregard an obligation evidently entails that he is not at fault – did not quite satisfy, and that even if the student chose to say no more about it, the air between them would whisper of broken trust, lost respect. He says, “how can he rightly resent me for acting as he would have acted?”<sup>187</sup> meaning not the dubious point that if a student is slack it is acceptable for him to drop his own standards, but the more dubious point that the student, being equally rational, would act in the same way and would therefore recognize that his tutor’s letting him down without notice, explanation or apology was entirely rational, and hence, acceptable. I cannot believe Portmore is oblivious that it does not end there, since having let the student down places a burden on him such that, should he on another occasion have sufficient reason as he sees it to disregard an obligation to him, choosing the alternative would place him more deeply in debt to the student’s goodwill, rather than keeping him morally solvent as he seems to think. Should another occasion present him with sufficient reason as he sees it to let someone else down he could start to get, if he hasn’t already, a reputation for being unreliable because his rational approach to problem-solving gives moral commitments no special weight. This makes his promises worthless because if they are in his view overridden he owes nothing – his making a commitment gives no ground for expectation of its being kept, or if not, of acknowledgement of the failure. It is true that we commonly have to break commitments, and because the future is unpredictable we know that people may not be able to do what they have said they will; what is not true is that when that happens, when we break commitments for reasons we consider sufficiently important, the commitment simply ceases to be. What is also not true is that we would break a commitment for something that is only equally important. Something else has to be, in some sense, more important, for a promise to be excusably broken. Portmore’s example does not work.

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<sup>187</sup> Portmore, *Commonsense Consequentialism*, 50.



Suppose he was able to get word to the student, explaining the need to postpone the meeting. Then in doing so he acknowledges an obligation and the student's claim upon him. That would be appropriate because the situation is one of his being under an obligation, which does not grow or shrink in relation to the importance of his other reasons to act, disappearing altogether if the alternatives are suitably weighty, or even, apparently, merely equally so. He had a commitment, the circumstances have changed, and now he wants to do something else; he is confronted with a changed moral situation, additional unforeseen factors, a new deliberation. Because the promise was made, it does not disappear in light of present circumstances, but figures in his current deliberation. Portmore makes sure to explain that in the absence of the new situation the obligation stands. The new issue gives him a new moral problem, which is: how much importance can he give to his personal interests relative to those of his student? Because he already had a commitment he has a moral problem; without it there would be no problem and he would not need to ask himself if he may lecture. The situation also involves the student morally – he is being let down, what is his response? He reaches a similar conclusion to that of the tutor – he is disappointed to lose an educational opportunity, but it was not so important that he is willing to assert his interests over those of his tutor. If, on the other hand, the tutor cannot get word, then he may (in the sense of possibility not permission) decide to let the student down, with compunction, and to apologize later because it is a fact that he let him down. This gracious student would be only too understanding, recognizing that we are all subject to unforeseen eventualities; and Portmore, I have no doubt, would appreciate that and make strenuous efforts not to let him down again, even forgoing the next opportunity if necessary.

So this example does not work as a case of having sufficient non-moral reason to override a moral requirement. It is more aptly represented as a case of having competing reasons for action, and seeking a solution that addresses all factors in a morally acceptable way if possible. It is not a conflict between morality and something else, but a new moral problem. The reason this representation is more apt is because, when reasons compete, the evaluation of the situation itself requires moral judgment as to what is the best solution. It is not the case that the agent's interests lie outside morality and other people's within it: the problem, as I have suggested, is the moral one of judging whether his own interests in this case warrant the sacrifice of someone else's or the other way around. It cannot be assumed in advance that what is at stake for the agent must necessarily be less important than what is at stake for others. Nor can it be assumed that choosing one course over the other means the other dissolves away – that it figures in deliberation means that it has importance; that only one course can be taken cannot mean that suddenly the alternative is not important. In some

cases the competing claims are not mutually exclusive – one may be able both to give the lecture and meet the student later. In other cases there is a genuine conflict – where, say, this was the last chance to see the student before the exam, competing with the unique chance to earn extra money, then there is no question of satisfying both demands. In this particular example, if the meeting with the student is sufficiently important it ceases to be the example Portmore wants it to be, because the moral obligation would override the alternative. Portmore wants the alternatives to be equal in weight, but if we are prepared to accept that, then we are deprived of rational means of choice, and that cannot show what he wants it to show, that taking the non-moral alternative is rational. He chose arbitrarily, and the choice could have gone the other way; neither, as described, would be rational: reasons do not clinch the choice. The impossibility of notifying the student, if it is meant to make this case one of either-or, fails to do that. It does not show that rationally responding to reasons and taking one alternative simply erases the other without remainder, but rather that, depending on which alternative is taken, it either becomes a case of broken obligation, and that places the tutor under a new obligation to make amends, or of a lost opportunity, and it may be a matter of regret that the opportunity to earn money could not be taken. I shall comment further on the implications of that in what follows.

Portmore presents the situation as one of conflict between moral and other sorts of reason, and as though the outcome of deliberation is open, as in another example, designed to illustrate the unreasonableness of the demands of classic act utilitarianism when reasons conflict. In that example, Anita needs a heart transplant. She could murder her estranged uncle to get a tissue match. The balance of utility favours the murder by a small amount, yet: “It seems that, in this instance, the moral reason that she has to refrain from committing murder outweighs the self-interested reason that she has to commit murder.”<sup>188</sup> One abhorrent feature of act utilitarianism is that it treats what ought to be done as open, pending the outcome of the utility calculation, and represents the resulting ‘ought’ as a moral one.<sup>189</sup> Portmore allows that the self-interested reason Anita has to murder her uncle (presumably, prolonging her life) is outweighed by her moral reason not to do so (often said to be depriving the murdered of utility),<sup>190</sup> apparently independently of utility calculations.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>189</sup> This was Anscombe’s point in “Modern Moral Philosophy”, *Philosophy*, 33, No. 124 (Jan 1958), 17.

<sup>190</sup> I suggest these reasons, as Portmore does not give any, but implies that there are such items, though referring to reasons in this way appears to duplicate reasons: instead of self-interest, or an obligation, being a reason to act, he implies there are reasons to be self-interested, or to keep an obligation. That implies that a reason to do something is outside the act, causing people to refer to consequences, or motives, as that reason. Prichard rejected this, as we saw in chapter 1, in favour of the reason to act being internal to the act. The moral reason not to murder someone is that it is murder; the self-interested reason to do something is that it is in self-interest.

However, he allows the deliberation, when for a person to think of murder as a potential solution to a problem is already morally corrupt – murder is wrong, not wrong for a reason, but wrong, which is to say that there is no need to allude to something outside the murder to indicate why it is wrong, as though it could be right if those factors were different. For, while he allows that the moral reason in this case counts against murder, the way in which he does so keeps open the possibility that under different circumstances the moral reason not to murder might not be enough.<sup>192</sup> That means that he assumes that these are reasons on an equal footing and the overall judgment could in principle go either way. It is a matter of interest that the ‘reasons’ and what makes one more, in some sense, than another, are always off the page. Portmore’s examples are designed on the assumption that reasons of self-interest are at least sometimes rationally permitted to trump morality, and this presupposes that there is a point of view external to morality from which rationality arbitrates these conflicts, taking all kinds of reason into account equally without prejudice as to the outcome. I see no reason to accept this, rather than the view that the judgment about what one ought overall to do is itself a moral judgment. On my understanding of Prichard, if he was right, then, when one has competing reasons for action, moral reasons do not compete on an equal footing with others with the possibility of being overruled; rather, the judgment of what ought overall to be done must itself be acceptable to morality. What that is does not have to be one of the actions to the exclusion of others, but may be some amalgam or modification reflecting priorities.

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### 3.2. BLAME – LIABILITY AND DESERT, AND KINDS OF WRONG

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Further, whether a person deserves blame is ambiguous. To know if someone is blameworthy we need to know whether what they have done is a wrong, and in addition, whether, if it is a wrong, it deserves censure. That is, we need to know whether their action is of a kind that is liable to blame at all, and secondly, if it is of that kind, whether the particularities of the action are such as to deserve blame or not. That someone deserves blame is a judgment that a wrong of a kind for which blame is appropriate has been done, that the agent is responsible, and that a penalty ought to be imposed rather than in clemency

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<sup>191</sup> A utility calculation assesses net utility and if more is gained than lost, then the action is morally required. How is Portmore morally assessing the action if not in terms of utility? If he can morally assess it without utility, then what is a utility calculation for? If in terms of utility, then how can he say that there is a moral reason going into the utility calculation, since a moral judgment is supposed to be the outcome of a utility calculation?

<sup>192</sup> It might be suggested that the examples are deliberately stark to reveal the implications more clearly while better examples would be more nuanced and realistic, if less easy to decide. The question is, could any plausible example be devised, and if so, why has that not been done, since this is not plausible.

waived. The idea of liability to blame involves the conceptual connection between blame and wrongdoing that Portmore says his premise 2.10 expresses<sup>193</sup> – to ask if someone is liable to blame is to ask if their action comes within the ambit of blame, if it is the kind of action for which it is appropriate to consider whether or not they deserve blame without yet implying that they do. In that sense, to deem an action liable to blame is to deem it a wrong – without as yet specifying what kind of wrong it is if there is more than one. Portmore’s premise 2.11 implies that non-moral errors as well as moral wrongs are liable to blame, and I find that far from obvious. Actions that are not wrong certainly do not appear to be appropriate candidates for blame at all, and that is what Portmore means by saying there is a conceptual connection between blame and acting wrongly.<sup>194</sup>

Portmore’s “intuitively plausible” premise, 2.11, however, gives us little help on which kinds of wrong action are liable to blame other than their being a subset of irrational actions. Arguably, however, this simply picks out the wrong set of actions for blame, since irrationality of itself does not appear to me to be liable to blame at all, and the kind of action I thought was in principle liable to blame, namely moral wrongdoing, apparently is not always liable, rather than being always liable but sometimes excusable (with which I would readily have agreed). The case of my investment example earlier, or using a sledgehammer to crack a nut, show that practical irrationality is not always suitable for blame, and Portmore recognizes that. It may turn out to be true that some actions for which the agent had insufficient reason are blameable; my question is whether, if there are such cases, it is the fact of their contravening reason that renders them liable to blame, as opposed to their being at the same time moral wrongs (or some other kind of wrong, if other kinds are liable to blame). I suspect the latter is the case; but that awaits argument. In the meantime, since all Portmore says is that blame accrues to some instances of the contravention of reason, it does not appear to be the case that it is the fact of an action’s contravening reason, or that alone, that renders it blameworthy, but Portmore does not tell us what does, and given our different responses to examples, I am left wondering what it is.

It might be possible to devise a scenario in which we thought someone’s acting irrationally was morally culpable; I can’t offhand. It cannot be a case where a moral wrong is done out of irrationality, if that can happen (perhaps this always happens – perhaps this was Plato’s

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<sup>193</sup> Portmore, *Commonsense Consequentialism*, 44.

<sup>194</sup> I agree with Portmore that blame does not arise when no wrong of any kind has been done. It may be that we blame someone for doing with shabby motives what in spite of them turns out for the best. Then if blame accrues, it is for the wrongful motives, and not for the wrong deed, bad consequences, etc, which *ex hypothesi* have not occurred. If they have actually done a wrong that turned out for the best, we would blame them for the wrong and not the consequences. Indeed, when we blame someone for wrongdoing it is not primarily for the consequences.

view). Blame would then accrue for the moral wrong, not obviously for the irrationality, which might draw scorn but that is not blame, and what we would need to judge is whether irrationality is or is not a mitigating factor. It has to be a case where irrationality itself is blameworthy. It might be suggested that investing unwisely is a case of blameworthy contravention of reason, if the person loses all and renders his family homeless. My thought about that is that not protecting the family by taking precautions against failure if the investment is less rewarding than hoped is blameworthy, but there is nothing problematic about that: it is a moral wrong, and the action for which blame applies is that of failing to take adequate steps to protect the family, it being possible to take such steps. Reason is contravened by the different action(s)<sup>195</sup> of making a bad decision to invest at all, if that is where the irrationality lies,<sup>196</sup> and/or about what to invest in, and, if you like, the further action of buying the unprofitable shares,<sup>197</sup> but I cannot see these actions as blameworthy. They might be described as unwise, rash, naïve or simply mistaken – none of which seem to be ways of blaming or of themselves liable to blame. Either that, or behaving rationally is a moral obligation, or blame is not moral blame.

Perhaps Portmore just is claiming there is such a thing as non-moral blame. All that can amount to, it seems to me, is the attribution of authorship of a non-moral mistake, combined with an attitude in the region of contempt, and this is not what I understand by blame. I think the difference may be subtle, and I don't want to make distinctions that are not real, but it seems to be important that moral blame is for a perceived wrong against a person, and an error of rationality is not, in its capacity as an error of rationality, a wrong against persons, so does not incur blame. If a person's mistake causes others difficulty, then they may blame him morally for causing them difficulty, but they do not blame him morally for the practical irrationality that brought it about. If the same error had not troubled them, there would be no blame.

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<sup>195</sup> Or the same action under a different description; it seems to me unimportant whether we call these different actions, or one action differently described. It does not affect my point.

<sup>196</sup> To invest at all is irrational if the person lacks experience, knowledge, and money – then, in relation to investing, he acts foolishly but not immorally. Investing is not irrational if the opposite of that is true – the investment can still go wrong and the error lies elsewhere, in faulty calculations, misjudging the relevance of certain factors, etc. This sort of error does not look blameworthy; it may draw sympathy.

<sup>197</sup> If the person believed, erroneously, owing to calculating wrongly, that the investment was good, he would be acting rationally in investing. We could say he had insufficient reason in that *we* know of reasons why he should not invest; we could also say he had sufficient reason because *he* thought it was going to be profitable.

Portmore quotes Darwall<sup>198</sup> as saying blame accrues when someone does something they should not, all things considered, have done. That may be true, but my thought is that it is because what they should not have done was immoral. Darwall adds, “To feel guilt is, in part, to feel that one shouldn’t have done what one did.”<sup>199</sup> True, but guilt is for moral wrongdoing, not for a breach of reason. One may regret errors of reason, but one does not feel guilt. Guilt arises for wronging people, and that can happen as a consequence of faulty thinking, as when someone misreads a map and directs people one way when they should go the other, and they get lost. The mapreader feels guilt, but the guilt is for causing inconvenience, not for misreading the map. If it merely comes to someone’s notice that they thought that X was here when it is in fact there, they make the same mistake but they cannot feel guilty. They have done what they should not have done – they have misread a map; they might regret their poor mapreading skills. If they ought to have checked, or ought not to have directed people unless they were sure, then these may be blameworthy, but they are wrongs to people. Acting rashly, as perhaps in the investment example, parting with money before completing adequate research, may attract contempt, or pity, but I don’t see it as attracting blame, unless people are wronged. To say that we may still blame this person for their rashness sounds wrong to me – we may despise him for his stupidity, but we cannot blame him for his rashness unless he owes us money and cannot now pay.

I suggest that when we assess a person’s behaviour morally, we have in mind such things as the significance of his actions for people, his motives, the nature and extent of his concern for his family, his character. When we assess whether he behaves rationally, we have in mind the quality of thinking that is apparent in his actions: the thoroughness of his research, the appropriateness of his actions to his ends. These two sorts of concern are connected, but conceptually separate. The relation may be causal, poor practical thinking causing poor behaviour, or constitutive, the poor behaviour being a manifestation of poor thinking: and perhaps, then, immorality can arise out of irrationality, implying that such cases are possible. Nevertheless, moral errors and rational errors are two kinds of error, and if we blame people for errors of rationality, then the action, or aspect of their action, for which we blame them is different from that for which we blame them if their error is a moral one. The nature of the blame, if we allow that it is blame in both cases, also differs: the reactive attitudes appropriate to moral wrongs are different from, at least not entirely coextensive with, those appropriate to errors of practical reason. Whether blame, as a reactive attitude, or “blaming emotions such as guilt, indignation and resentment”,<sup>200</sup> are appropriate to errors of practical

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<sup>198</sup> Portmore, *Commonsense Consequentialism*, 46.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

reason seems doubtful to me: if someone expresses a “blaming emotion” at someone else’s folly, as opposed to amusement, pity or scorn, I would wonder how that folly had affected them. It may well have done so, but then the reaction is for the personal offence and not the offence against reason, and that is a moral offence. We could only blame irrationality, I think, if thinking straight is itself a moral responsibility, but if it is, then being irrational is itself a moral failure. I don’t think that is what Portmore is claiming, and I think that claim would attenuate both concepts and blur a useful distinction.

If a thing ought rationally not to be done, then it is on a par with going to sea in a sieve, putting all one’s eggs in one basket – what is wrong with it is that it won’t achieve one’s ends, or is not the best way to do so, or manifests lack of understanding of what the action is. If a thing ought morally not to be done, then it is on a par with cheating, lying, callousness, deceit, etc. – what is wrong with it is that it wrongs people. Bad investment ought rationally not to be done because it is bad – it won’t make a profit; if it ought morally not to be done, then it is because it wrongs people. This is not an essential feature of bad investment: if a person harms only themselves as a result of acting from poor judgment, we do not blame them; if acting from poor judgment causes harm to others then we may do so. What emerges from that line of thought is that any action is in principle subject to appraisal either as moral or as rational, but the two sorts of appraisal are made with respect to different considerations or concerns. One kind of appraisal may have implications for the other – how rational someone has been may have implications for the kind of blame they incur for a moral wrong – if they were not rational, then perhaps they are not blameworthy, but the question of blame arises because persons have been wronged. Plato asked whether anyone would knowingly do wrong. I shall say more about that in the ensuing chapters.

Portmore’s contention is that while some irrationality is blameworthy, irrational action does not always amount to a wrong, but immoral action doesn’t either. Portmore seems to think that letting the student down without notice or apology does not constitute any kind of wrong, *a fortiori* not moral wrong, since it seems obvious to him that having had sufficient reason to act he is not even liable to blame, so we cannot go on to ask whether he deserves blame or may be excused. He says “Given my flawless execution of my capacity for sound practical reasoning, how can I be faulted for breaking my promise? Is it not inappropriate to hold me morally responsible and, thus, potentially blameworthy in virtue of my capacity for being guided by sound practical reasoning and then blame me for acting as sound practical reasoning leads me to act?”<sup>201</sup> He is saying here that what renders a person potentially

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<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

blameworthy is their capacity for being guided by sound reasons, so it is the faulty exercise of that capacity, or acting from such exercise, that raises the issue of blame, but since he has reasoned soundly and acted accordingly, it makes no sense to blame him. He is not asking to be excused, which involves accepting that a wrong has been done; rather, because he has responded appropriately to reasons, he cannot be faulted, i.e. no wrong has been done, and so he is not liable to blame. The “flawless execution” of his rational capacity precludes the issue of blame altogether.

Perhaps I misread him – could he mean that blame accrues only when contravening those moral reasons that are decisive overall, but not any other reasons that are decisive overall? That flouting non-decisive moral reasons is still wrong but not blameworthy? If so, his view is that blame is inappropriate when a person has sufficient reason, even when overlooking morality and doing something morally wrong. Nor perhaps is a person blameworthy when they favour moral reasons over decisive rational ones, because their action is foolish but not morally wrong, in fact it is morally right. So they are at fault and blameworthy when they act against a decisive moral reason, because they act both irrationally and immorally. That is, Portmore’s view may be that what is liable to blame is failure to act on overall decisive moral reasons, cases of irrational immorality: actions which are both against reason and morality. Perhaps that construal fits with what he says here: “Should not even the student admit that, had he been in my situation and perfectly rational, he might also have been led to act as I did? And if so, how can he rightly resent me for acting as he would have acted?”<sup>202</sup> The student cannot resent him because, although he has done something morally wrong, it was not an irrational immorality, and blame accrues only for that.

It is not clear to me that this reading fits with his concluding remarks: “even if not particularly relevant to whether we ought to do something, the fact that an act is morally ... required is highly relevant to the appropriateness of feeling various blaming emotions, such as guilt, indignation, and resentment ... So even if in wondering what we ought to do we can just ignore moral requirements ... we cannot ignore moral requirements ... if we want to know when it is appropriate to feel various blaming emotions.”<sup>203</sup> I think this remark says that we need to know if morality has been flouted because reactive attitudes may be appropriate whether or not the action was rationally required, i.e. not just for irrational immorality but any immorality. Yet he continues, “Someone can freely and knowledgeably do something contrary to what she has decisive reason to do, but unless that act is also

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<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.



morally ... wrong it would be inappropriate to blame her for acting as she did.”<sup>204</sup> Someone can knowingly fail to act as objectively rationally required, but only if also morally wrong does blame accrue – so, as in the previous paragraph, blame is for irrational immorality only, and not for flouting rationality, nor for moral wrong when rationality requires it. If reactive attitudes may be appropriate for a moral wrong whether or not condoned by rationality, then, contrary to what he said about the student, it would be appropriate for the student to resent being let down even though, as Portmore portrays it, the tutor responded appropriately to reasons. Resentment would be a blaming response to a moral wrong condoned by reason. Either that, or Portmore doesn’t see the tutor’s letting the student down as morally wrong even though all-things-considered right – in which case, why did he present it as a case of conflict between moral reasons and self-interest? If, on the other hand, he means that we need to know the moral status of an action as well as its rational status, because only irrational immorality is blameworthy, then he means that if we conclude that some immoral action was rational then we must recognize that the blaming emotions stirring within are not appropriate. However, that would appear to support my claim that blame is conceptually connected with moral wrongdoing, and that moral wrongs are liable to blame, but not always deserving of it because there may be excusing factors.

I interpret Portmore’s adding these afterthoughts about reactive attitudes as an attempt to reconcile with his expressed view the recognition that even with, as he presents it, rationally required breaches of morality, there are likely to be repercussions, and that seems to favour my thought that the overall ‘ought’, having taken all reasons into account, must be a morally acceptable action, and hence such breaches of morality as may be forced upon us by circumstances do not pass without remainder. His attempt to effect that reconciliation seems to me unsuccessful. That morality on occasion must or will be left out is, as Bernard Williams often said, amongst other reasons because events are not matched to the demands of morality such that every problem has a neat solution. In two essays, “Moral Luck” and “Conflicts of Values”,<sup>205</sup> Williams addresses the difficulty of reconciling conflicts of values within and beyond morality. In the former there is a discussion of the nuanced reactive attitudes of self and others to different sorts of wrong in response to the irresolvable conflict of morality with personal projects,<sup>206</sup> and in the latter he says of values, which are “plural, conflicting and irreducible”, that “it is precisely their conflicts which systematisers (at the limit, reductionists) seek to overcome, while pluralists ... regard the conflicts as both

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<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>205</sup> Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981).

<sup>206</sup> Williams, *Moral Luck*. See the discussion of regret, p.27ff.

ineliminable and not resolvable without remainder.”<sup>207</sup> Rejecting as “Utopian” any hope that ultimate resolution could be achieved, by our making the world, or more usually our state of knowledge, better, he says, “The sceptic about Utopia doubts that there is anywhere for that kind of enlightenment or insight to come from, since his understanding of values as they are gives no hope that their present incoherences could be radically transcended without loss.”<sup>208</sup> The point is that morality is likely to be compromised by circumstances, and when that happens, even for reasons with which all would sympathize, it does not go away; that transcending incoherence would involve loss is a point I deal with in the last chapter.

#### 4. DORSEY’S CRITICISM OF PORTMORE

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Dale Dorsey offers several arguments against the supremacy of morality, hence against the strong version of moral rationalism.<sup>209</sup> In fact, he also argues against the weak version presented by Portmore, offering a specific case against Portmore’s argument from blame. He maintains that sometimes rational justification does not await moral justification, and points out that all anti-rationalism need claim in order to show moral rationalism false is that on at least one occasion one can be justified in flouting a moral requirement – it does not need to claim that acting morally is never rational or even often not so.<sup>210</sup> He denies the rational supremacy of morality; for this reason I am calling his position weak anti-rationalism (WAR), since there is a stronger position which denies that reason can endorse moral action at all.

He accepts Portmore’s “intuitively plausible premise”, 2.11, that blaming someone for acting as they have sufficient reason to act is inappropriate – although he admits that “in some moods the intuition can be shaken.”<sup>211</sup> It seems to him reasonable to doubt that it is fitting to blame someone for doing something they have sufficient reason to do, and thinks that this must still apply if what they do is a breach of morality. He focuses his attention on premise 2.10, saying that although popular, it is hard to reconcile with anti-rationalism.

Premise 2.10 of Portmore’s argument for moral rationalism was:

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<sup>207</sup> *Moral Luck*, 71-2, in which he introduces the discussion with a reference to Berlin, whom he regards favourably on the matter of pluralism and its difficulties.

<sup>208</sup> Williams, *Moral Luck*, 80.

<sup>209</sup> Dale Dorsey, “Against the Supremacy of Morality”, <http://people.ku.edu/~ddorsey/supremacy.pdf> accessed 28/08/2014.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

If S is morally required to x, then S would be blameworthy for, in full knowledge, not doing x.

We recall that Portmore said this premise expresses a conceptual connection between blame and moral wrongdoing. Dorsey calls this connection into question. He finds the proposition difficult to reconcile with 2.11, which he accepts, and the conclusion he wishes to draw, that we can be justified in not conforming to moral requirements. If we can be justified in not doing what morality requires, he does not want to blame us. Portmore does not blame us for flouting a moral reason when rationally required to do so, but in his view, in that case a moral reason does not amount to a requirement; moral requirements are moral reasons that rationality endorses, and we can be blamed for flouting these. Dorsey acknowledges that moral rationalists appeal to 2.11 to deny that we can be justified in flouting moral requirements, which is the fundamental tenet of moral rationalism. But as an anti-rationalist he maintains just the opposite of this, and he can equally appeal to 2.11 to deny that one is blameworthy for not acting as morally required.

He grants the argument is inconclusive, so at this point, for added weight he appeals to examples offered with the intention of showing the denial of MR plausible, by showing that moral justification can be superfluous to rational justification, i.e. that we can have sufficient reason to flout morality. I can only say of these examples what I said of Portmore's examples; he finds them plausible and I don't. I don't know which is the most revealingly implausible, so I'll take just one:

*Andrea:* Andrea is deciding whether to attend Eastern Private College or Local Big State University. To attend EP, Andrea would have to travel halfway across the country and would get to see her family only rarely. However, Andrea's family has undergone a series of tremendous hardships, including the death of Andrea's younger sibling, which devastated her parents. If she were to attend LBSU, Andrea could live at home, and successfully tend to her parents' emotional needs, which is clearly essential for their well-being, at very little additional cost in time or energy. Nevertheless, it is important to Andrea, simply for her own sake, to go to EP. (Assume Andrea's future prospects would not be hampered in any significant way by staying at home.)<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

Dorsey asks us to imagine that Andrea chooses EP over LBSU in spite of the moral pressure to stay at home; impartial moral reasons, apart from filial or associative obligations, tell in favour of going to LBSU so she can support her parents. Even so, he says, it is plausible that Andrea is justified in going to EP because it is important to her – so she has a strong prudential reason to go.

He acknowledges Scheffler's point that arguments like this presuppose that moral demands are prudentially stringent and cannot accommodate non-moral considerations – since some people might hold that Andrea's prudential interest in attending EP morally justifies her going.<sup>213</sup> He makes three comments on this. Firstly, those norms that maintain sufficient rational justificatory force don't count of themselves as morally significant: morality cares little about the demands, say, of politeness, or about Andrea's prudential reasons to attend EP. Morality may care about Andrea's well-being, but not in the same way as prudence does. Any moral significance her interest has is clearly trumped by the moral pressure to stay local. Second, Dorsey wants only to shift the burden of the argument to the moral rationalist, and since it is *prima facie* plausible in this case to argue that Andrea's rational justification for going to EP need not await her moral justification, the burden is on MR to argue for a conception of the moral point of view that grants significance to the demands of prudence. But third, Dorsey thinks the argument does not need him to be committed to that conception of the moral point of view. Since we won't know, until we've got a definitive moral theory, which action Andrea is definitively morally required to take, it seems true that we don't need to await moral justification to decide what she is rationally justified in doing.<sup>214</sup>

Does this do the work Dorsey wants? Dorsey says that impartial moral reasons apart from Andrea's family and 'associative obligations' tell in favour of staying near the people who happen to be relying heavily on Andrea for support in the place where she happens to live. I cannot think of any impartial moral reasons for Andrea to support these people. Maybe I, impartially, should support these people, but perhaps she is nearer; but there are thousands of people in that town about equidistant from the two who are, inexplicably, depending on Andrea. I cannot think of any reasons why Andrea should support these people, apart from the fact that they are her parents, and the parents of her dead sibling, who have loved and cared for her all her life. So there are obvious partial moral reasons to stay local: because these are her parents, and because this is home, and because Andrea's parents are evidently in need of her emotional support (often and more aptly called 'moral support' which is more

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<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

apt here, unless her parents are actually psychologically troubled, rather than grieving, which I'm going to rule out). But EP suits Andrea better for personal reasons – it's where she wants to be. There must be reasons, *ex hypothesi*, that make this preferable to Andrea even though we are told not going won't hamper her future prospects; maybe the course suits her academic interests better, there are better gymnastics facilities, and it's time for Andrea to fly the nest, to make a life of her own. Her sibling's death has already hampered that process for her, but she's beginning to feel able to take the next step. Only her parents aren't ready for that, and she feels that poignantly.

At the risk of sounding like an agony aunt, the reason Andrea should go to EP, and her parents know it, is because it is best for Andrea, and as parents, they know they must do what is best for Andrea, and that is all they want to do. They know they must let go – their grief, the inevitable fear of losing another child, cannot be allowed to get in the way of doing the right thing for Andrea. So Scheffler's point has force – Andrea's personal interests are morally important, and indeed, are a moral matter for her parents. Dorsey might say their moral concerns are irrelevant since our interest is Andrea's decision, not theirs. But it cannot be true that one is morally obliged to answer to claims that are not themselves morally justified – whether their claim is or is not, whether their needs, rightly attended to, compromise her own plans, is itself part of her moral deliberation. It is because she cares for them, while also having concerns of her own, that this can present itself as a problem for her. The situation could equally be described as a conflict between interests, or needs, Andrea's and her parents', instead of a conflict between duty and self-interest, but it is no less a matter of moral judgment for Andrea, whether, and if so how, it falls upon her to best meet competing claims.

So Dorsey's first comment does not hold – morality does care about Andrea's prudential concerns, and if prudence takes an interest in Andrea's well-being to the exclusion of other concerns while morality encompasses more, a difference in the nature of their respective concerns that Dorsey notes, this would show that morality's concerns subsume those of prudence: morality has to take all factors into account before it can make a decision, while prudence focuses on Andrea,<sup>215</sup> rather than showing them having separate spheres of concern. His second comment depends on the example showing it plausible that rationality does not wait upon moral justification: that we can see that Andrea has a good case for going to EP for self-interested reasons without waiting for a pronouncement on her moral reasons. But we could turn that round, and just present her moral reasons, not mention her prudential

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<sup>215</sup> In the next chapter, I shall discuss Plato's view that a person's well-being cannot be properly served unless she acts morally, so interest and morality coincide.

ones, and then it would look as though there were strong moral reasons to stay, without waiting to hear about her prudential reasons. When additional reasons of any kind may surface, further to those already considered, we cannot rule in advance that their appearance will not alter the case – will not alter its moral assessment. His third point, that since we need a definitive moral theory to tell us what Andrea is actually morally required to do, and that is not in the offing, this shows that rational justification does not await moral justification, could be turned around in the same way: I have no knowledge of any definitive rational theory according to which we can pronounce that it is finally rationally justified for Andrea to go to EP, so, pending that, we could say moral justification is sufficient to carry the decision. I would rather say, though, that to know what Andrea has most reason, all considered, to do, involves taking all factors into account – her own desires, interests, needs, commitments, cares and concerns, and those of her parents, and that decision is a moral decision – she may or may not morally judge, as I do, that she does not owe her parents this. So we do not have an illustration of the claim that sometimes moral justification is superfluous to rational justification, such that we know what someone ought all things considered to do without reference to their moral reasons. What we have is another example of morality being essential to the overall assessment of what anybody does for whatever reasons.

Without detailing all three examples Dorsey offers, I can only say that I find none persuades me that rational justification does not await moral justification, and for the reasons I have given, I suspect no better examples could be constructed.

Dorsey says more about the connection between blame and wrongdoing. Allowing that it is a conceptual connection, he notes that there are “competing interpretations of wrongdoing”<sup>216</sup> – wrong can be either moral wrong or rational wrong. As he puts it, to do wrong, in the moral sense, is to do “something that is an inappropriate answer to the question: ‘how does morality command me to live?’”<sup>217</sup>. To do wrong, in the rational sense, is to do “something that is an inappropriate answer to the question: ‘how should I live?’”<sup>218</sup> He rightly says that for Portmore’s argument to support moral rationalism it must be taken in the former sense, as asserting a conceptual connection between blameworthiness and moral wrongdoing, but “this interpretation faces a number of very serious challenges”.<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Dorsey, “Against the Supremacy of Morality”, 19.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*

Firstly, he says, the claim seems to be wrong “as a piece of conceptual analysis”.<sup>220</sup> He offers a counterexample discussed by Michael Slote, of “Churchill’s fire-bombing of innocent German civilians”.<sup>221</sup> That it is intelligible for someone to defend the action, and indeed admire it, Dorsey says (I’m not certain we admire the action, but we or someone might regard it as one of those courageous political decisions that none of us would want to have to make) implies that it cannot be a matter of the *concept* of immorality that it is blameworthy, for here is a case of “admirable immorality”, immorality that at least some people may intelligibly deem not blameworthy. If we disagree, then we need to give substantive reasons why the action deserves blame, and that means the connection is not conceptual – moral wrongdoing is not necessarily blameworthy.

Secondly, confronted by the sort of saintly moral perfection discussed by Susan Wolf, where a person never falls short of the moral demands upon them, we may regard this as “evidence of a deficient character” and may think “that it is on occasion praiseworthy to (freely and knowingly) flout”<sup>222</sup> moral requirements – to spend time for example developing our golf shots, or honing our cooking skills, even when there are people in need whom we are capable of helping. People may differ in their moral evaluations of engaging in such activities, but Dorsey says, “it seems implausible to say that we cannot praise doing so as a matter of the *concept* of immorality.”<sup>223</sup>

These considerations lead him to reject the idea of a conceptual connection between immorality and blameworthiness. We can still accept, he says, a conceptual connection between blameworthiness and wrongdoing – on the other interpretation, as rational wrongdoing. If we do so, we read the premise asserting the conceptual connection to say: ‘If S is rationally required to do x, then S would be blameworthy for knowingly not doing x.’ However, this reading gives Portmore’s argument no force against moral anti-rationalism, and, Dorsey says, nor can it rebut the reasonable doubts revealed by his counterexamples.

He argues the more plausible position is that blame is conceptually connected with rational wrongdoing, because if one lacks sufficient practical justification, “then one acts as all things considered, one ought not to have acted. And unless one straightforwardly begs the question against moral anti-rationalism, this need not hold in all cases of immorality.”<sup>224</sup> It need not, if we accept that it is possible to have sufficient practical reason to flout morality.

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<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>221</sup> To be found in Slote, *Goods and Virtues*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1983), ch.4.

<sup>222</sup> Dorsey, “Against the Supremacy of Morality”, 20.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*

His view seems to beg the question against moral rationalism. Neither side has yet established their view – they regard premise 2.11 as plausible, and use it together with other contested assumptions to support their opposing conclusions. I do not find 2.11 plausible and have given reasons for thinking it may be false. If I am right about that, then neither has established the conclusion they favour.

In appealing to the idea of “admirable immorality” Dorsey argues that immorality does not appear to be, as a conceptual matter, blameworthy. This argument depends on failure to make the distinction I argued for, between being liable to blame and deserving of it. His argument shows that immorality is not automatically deserving of blame, because there may be mitigation. But these considerations do not show that immorality is not in principle liable to blame. Indeed, in the case of the sort of moral wrongs that appear to be political necessities, as in his chosen example, we do seem to meet an irresolvable and appalling clash of duties, and while we may be unable to decide whether to condemn or be thankful, or both, far from showing that blame is not necessarily connected with moral wrong, they show that the issue of blame arises naturally but that the answer to it is not decided in advance. We might well judge blame futile in such circumstances, especially where we can see that the person responsible was far from complacent about the rationality, or the political necessity if that is a different thing, of their actions. They may be as horrified as we are, and additionally, burdened with a well-placed guilt; but since I don’t know how to end war, I am not quite ready to blame everyone who gets their hands dirty on my behalf in conducting it. But nor am I willing to say that if they had, in some sense, sufficient reason, good reason, to do something that wrongs people, that no wrong has been done, or that it has been cancelled out by the reasons which rendered it necessary.

The issue of moral sainthood appears to me spurious. Ought, traditionally, implies can. It cannot seriously be suggested that real people could, physically, psychologically, humanly, spend every moment bent on alleviating suffering and righting wrongs. Whether and when a person has passed some of their time immorally by the omission of acts of social benevolence that appear, to someone, to be in some sense possible for them is a moral judgment: to form a view on what someone’s duty is, a person has to make a moral judgment about what the other can do: how fit they are, how much time they have, what commitments they have, and how they should deploy their material and inner resources. We might wonder why this busybody has wasted time morally appraising others when they could have spent the time more profitably on executing plans for making poverty history. The reason why anyone could so much as have a duty to do something involves the notion that the moral agent is an agent, capable of action. In order to be minimally that, we have



‘duties to ourselves’ as Kant put it. We need not put it that way, so long as we recognise that for a person to be at the very least an efficacious channel of benevolence<sup>225</sup> logically requires that they be someone, i.e. that they eat, sleep and maintain health. These activities like all others involve the use of time and resources in ways that are in principle morally assessable – just what is involved in maintaining the self as an agent, how much sleep we are permitted, what we may eat, without sinning against others; but it’s beginning to sound like the Spanish Inquisition. The ‘moral saint’, without exercising moral judgment and self-restraint, would soon die of self-neglect. It would reach the height of self-refuting absurdity to suggest they fail in their duty to others in allowing themselves to die; or to say that unless we sacrifice ourselves the world is doomed, or that one day when present calamities are overpast, our descendants may enjoy the fruits of our self-sacrificial toils, but for now, we must work, and work, for the common good.

The object of the exercise of benevolence is to render others better off. That must involve the ethical judgment of what makes life good for people, what makes life worth living. If good for one, then good for another. Where, in that train of thought, does it start to appear that one person, some people, should, morally, renounce all good for the sake of the good of others, unto death? Why is this lonely moral agent excluded from consideration? Why, in discussions about moral sainthood, is it always assumed that *we* are the moral agents, whose role it is to give of our bounty to others, helpless passive recipients, and that we, of apparently limitless strength and resources, have no need ourselves to benefit from the benevolence of others? Why is moral obligation assumed to involve the unspecific positive duty of improving the lot of others at all? Actual duties, as Prichard said, come into being when a person finds themselves in a certain kind of relation to another or others. That is to be judged, but the conclusion is that the duties that are supposedly excusably breached by people who fall short of moral sainthood are not their duties, and therefore, do not constitute a counterexample to the view that blame and moral wrongdoing are conceptually connected.<sup>226</sup>

Dorsey has more to say on the conceptual connection. He says it can take a stronger or a weaker form. The stronger form says that immorality is conceptually blameworthy independently of whether one is rationally justified in acting that way. He finds two

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<sup>225</sup> See Bernard Williams’ remark in J.J.C. Smart and Bernard Williams, “Utilitarianism: For and Against” (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1973), p.96.

<sup>226</sup> I do not see this as an issue of finding the right boundary between duty and the supererogatory. It is about getting the concept of morality right, knowing when a person has a duty and when they don’t, and not inventing imaginary duties from the infinitely many things which a person at any moment is not doing.

problems with this. The first is implausibility: he thinks it reasonable to believe that the blameworthiness of immoral action is related to the force of rational reasons to act thus. The second problem is that the assertion is in conflict with 2.11, because it says that an inquiry into whether one has sufficient reason to act immorally has no effect on the blameworthiness of doing so. Since he doesn't want to renounce 2.11, he rejects this form of the conceptual connection.

The weaker form would be that there is a conceptual connection between immorality and blameworthiness but it is not independent of whether moral requirements are rationally decisive. That is, it says that whether blame accrues to moral wrongdoing depends on whether one has decisive reason to so act, but one will never have decisive reason to so act. The problem with this, Dorsey says, is that it starts by assuming that moral wrong is always blameworthy, and that one can never have sufficient reason to behave immorally, thus begging the question in favour of moral rationalism.

Since the two positions are exclusive and exhaustive, one or other must be accepted. The connection between blame and moral wrong either depends on there being decisive reason to act morally or it does not. If it does, it conflicts with 2.11, if it does not, it is question-begging. He concludes, "Either way, this conceptual connection renders the argument from blameworthiness of little force against moral anti-rationalism."<sup>227</sup> I take that to mean that both strong and weak forms of the connection between blame and moral wrong are unacceptable, so he rejects the conceptual connection – we recall, he accepted the interpretation on which blame is conceptually connected with rational but not moral wrongdoing, but concluded that did not have force against anti-rationalism either.

Dorsey's objections to the stronger statement of the connection, in effect, simply reiterate the assertion of Portmore's 2.11, restating its plausibility. In that case, I have to repeat that I find that claim implausible, and the conceptual association between liability to blame and moral wrongdoing entirely plausible. I think my case is stronger if the distinction between liability to blame and deservingness of blame is invoked. If the connection is independent of one's having sufficient reason to act morally wrongly, as this form asserts, then cases like the supposedly "admirable immorality" become cases of moral wrong which are liable to blame, and the existence of strong countervailing reasons for the action may be taken as waiving or mitigating blame, while other reactive attitudes – regret, grief, guilt, may still be appropriate. Whether or not the wrongdoer is absolved of blame may depend on the strength

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<sup>227</sup> Dorsey, "Against the Supremacy of Morality", 22.

of overall reasons for which he acted, but it seems not a foregone conclusion even if the reasons were in some people's view very compelling. I think it depends on cases, and that seems to support the independence of blame from sufficiency of reasons. Hence, I would be happy to take the alternative route, jettison 2.11 and accept the conceptual connection between blame and moral wrong.

The objection to the weaker version also seems ineffective. He says this form begs the question in favour of moral rationalism, by starting from the assumption that the connection between blame and moral wrong depends on the rationalist belief that one never has sufficient reason to flout morality. It seems possible to avoid begging the question in this way only by begging the question the other way, in favour of moral anti-rationalism, by starting from the assumption that any connection between blame and moral wrong must allow for the possibility that one can have sufficient reason to act immorally. That assumes that any connection between blame and immorality is coincidental, dependent on having other reasons to justify the action, unless one thinks that one can have sufficient reason to act immorally yet still be blamed – but that is the stronger version.

Dorsey's argument is not entirely successful. Accepting 2.11 and taking issue with 2.10 shows that there is equipoise between WAR and WMR, and thus it shows a weakness of Portmore's argument for WMR, that we are not rationally justified in flouting moral requirements. But in accepting 2.11 which I gave reasons to reject, it does not establish the opposing weak anti-rationalist claim that we can be so justified. While I agree with Dorsey that Portmore's argument from blame is suspect, I diagnose the error differently. If I am right, Portmore has not shown that we must accept WMR, and that means that neither the strong nor the weak version has been sustained. Weak anti-rationalism has not been demonstrated either. Strong anti-rationalism, the view that reason has nothing to say about moral judgments, may still be correct. In chapter 5, I will give reasons why we do not have to accept this.

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## 5. KINDS OF REASON

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Returning to Portmore's example, we were asked to think of the situation as one in which he has sufficient reason to meet the student as agreed. Having sufficient reason implies that reason, rationality, permits us to keep our obligations other things equal. That itself is a curious way to conceive of our moral position, resting as far as I can see on questionable

assumptions, and one that slips in under the radar because it sounds so reasonable: who in their right mind would deny that reason permits us to do our duty? What could be more reasonable than doing the right thing? But those who assented to that didn't suspect that it meant duty is merely permissible, and not obligatory, and that this further implies it could be overridden by other reasons. They did not think, having recognised a call of duty, that they should now hesitate, lest it turn out they have better reasons not to do what they ought to do. That is quite a different situation from recognising the attractions of other courses of action; it is to suggest that people should think that even when they ought to do something, it may at the same time be possible that they ought not to do it – and without that being the thought that they may have made a mistake about what they morally ought to do, or the thought that deciding what one morally ought to do is only a stage in decision-making, pending completion by assessing whether additional reasons permit one to do what one already ought to do for moral reasons.

Put another way, I doubt there are situations in which it is possible that permission must be sought from some external authority for acting as morality directs – I mean Portmore's description is a misdescription. I do not see that rationality permits morality only in the absence of better reasons, that moral reasons are defeasible. He himself notes the oddity that in the absence of better reasons, sufficient reasons to do otherwise, a moral obligation is exactly that – an obligation or requirement. Another example of his asks us to consider a professor's dilemma when, committed to holding office hours, he gets the unexpected chance to meet an admired hero of his. Portmore takes it that without conflicting considerations it would be morally permissible for him to meet the hero, and that even with the conflict, in view of the personal importance of the opportunity, he has sufficient reason to break the commitment, but says, "Interestingly, though, we think that, if he did not have sufficient reason to be somewhere else, he would be morally required to hold his office hours."<sup>228</sup> Portmore thinks a requirement can stop being a requirement when the scales of importance tip; I think there is a more perspicuous way to describe this situation.

I think reality better represented by saying that, when morality competes with other reasons for acting, the fact, as many see it, that morality cannot be overlooked, need not imply that the other things disappear from view. It need mean only that an overall judgment has to be made about what must be done, and one that cannot ignore the moral matter, though the final outcome may accommodate other reasons in the situation. A duty may be postponed, waived by interested parties, or incorporated with other matters, according to importance, e.g. I have

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<sup>228</sup> Portmore, *Commonsense Consequentialism*, 52.

to visit Auntie, and I want to go shopping, so I suggest Auntie comes shopping with me; whatever imaginative problem-solving can devise. It is significant that we normally think that morality is the judge of the solution<sup>229</sup> – if Auntie is not well enough for shopping, my solution is no solution, indeed it would be selfish and insensitive to suggest it, making her feel she is keeping me from other things I would rather do; I may have to skip shopping, or do it later. Where there is actual conflict, and no accommodation is possible, then the consequences of not doing one or other cannot be avoided. If a moral breach cannot be avoided, that does not mean the unmet requirement dissolves away, as Portmore portrays it. Rather, damage limitation strategies are called for, and since that is so, it becomes relevant to think about repair work. Very often the issue is a slight one. Then the damage will be slight, the proposed repairs acceptable to the injured party and the repair bill affordable to the agent. That could be the case for the professor, a simple apology may well suffice, though it would be thoughtless to choose shopping over my obligation to Auntie and hope it will all be fine later, not that Auntie would say anything. There is of course damage that cannot be repaired. All of this is quite different from having done no wrong and incurring no debt. Where morality overrides, there may be regret for what is renounced in its favour, and regret need not be trivial; forgoing self-interest is not without remainder either. That is why it is better to say the problem of competing reasons is a moral one: of judging whose interests, which factors, are paramount, and one way to find out will be to consider the ramifications for the lives of those concerned, and the agent is one of them. What one ought all things considered to do is an essentially moral judgment and must be, where possible, acceptable to morality.

That a slight moral issue can conflict with a great personal one presents a moral problem – whether it is permissible, morally, to overlook a small duty for the sake of an important personal interest. It is not an indication that morality is unreasonably demanding: it is a question about what morality actually demands, to be answered by the result of the deliberative process – if possible: not all problems can be solved, sometimes events transpire and problems go away or transform. This calls into question whether making a distinction between kinds of reason in the way that is done in much of the literature<sup>230</sup> is misleading. What is represented as a conflict between morality and other kinds of reason, such as those

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<sup>229</sup> John L. Stocks, “The Limits of Purpose”, ch.1 in *Morality and Purpose* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969).

<sup>230</sup> See for example David Copp, “The Ring of Gyges: Overridingness and the Unity of Reason”, *Social Philosophy and Policy*, Vol.14, No.1 (1997), 86-106, in which he argues there is no overarching standpoint from which to adjudicate amongst verdicts of kinds of reason, and Owen McLeod, “Just Plain Ought”, *The Journal of Ethics*, Vol.5, No.4 (2001), 269-291, in which he argues that there is an all-things-considered ‘ought’ that is not relative to any particular normative framework.

of self-interest, taste, convenience, etiquette, law, religion, politics, economics etc., appears to misrepresent what is involved. It does not appear to be true that all of these are incommensurable domains of authority, though some of them may be – morality, politics, perhaps also law, and religion<sup>231</sup> may present irreconcilable demands: that may perhaps explain the case Dorsey called “admirable immorality”. For example, one cannot begin to consider one’s economic priorities unless one has a view on the importance of things, and that is a question of value – only then can one judge that it is better, or better for us, to spend more on this and do without that. The value of things may or may not include moral value, depending on the circumstances. It seems these may be better represented as different kinds of factor, or consideration, relevant to action, to be taken into account in deliberation, and evaluated – assigned value, or assessed for relative value, including, where relevant, moral value. From a point of view internal to etiquette, how one addresses an invitation is not a moral matter. As soon as we put etiquette into life, it is a moral matter – the fact of one’s observing or not observing etiquette, the manner of one’s doing so, may be morally revealing and significant. Choosing not to address an invitation in the expected way may be, and may be meant to be, a moral act – it may be used as a way of challenging convention, for example, or of putting people at ease. I am not sure whether morality even has reasons of its own rather than being the judge of reasons of all kinds. I shall say more about this in the last chapter.

Since agents are not channels of causal efficacy but morally significant factors in a situation, acts of self-effacement are themselves subject to moral evaluation – it cannot be assumed that we are each as agents necessarily to be absent from consideration, and if it is assumed, that itself expresses a moral point of view and not a neutral fact with which all can be expected to agree. The interests of the agent are amongst those to be considered, but it is also the case that interests cannot be considered apart from the person whose interests they are. This point could be framed in terms of rights, to say, for example, that people have rights to engage in activities which constitute their life as a life, or as a life worth living, or render them capable of being moral agents, or some such idea, and that others have obligations to respect those rights, thus converting a conflict between duty and interest into one between duty and rights, which may be an intra-moral conflict; but I am not interested in pursuing that line of thought because I don’t think introducing rights either promises greater clarity or strikes the right chord. Superson, to reinstate the agent’s significance, seems to suggest that impartiality means that interests can simply be detached from persons and weighed as if they

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<sup>231</sup> I have in mind Kierkegaard’s idea of the ‘teleological suspension of the ethical’ in connection with his analysis of the story of Abraham and Isaac in *Fear and Trembling*, eds C. Stephen Evans and Sylvia Walsh (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006).

are independent items<sup>232</sup> – but deciding whose interests are relevant and what their significance is itself a part of moral deliberation. It is also a distortion to concentrate on ‘interests’ since our concern is with the significance of what we do in and for our lives and the lives of those with whom we come into contact. We do not just stack reasons according to kind – moral, prudential and others – and see which pile is the highest. We consider what it will mean if we do this, or do that, to and for those concerned; whether we can reconcile this important factor with that; how we (all) shall be placed, shall feel, what we shall have to do, whether we can live with ourselves. The point is not that even small moral obligations can never ever be broken; nor that we can break trivial moral obligations but not important ones. It is simply that obligations are amongst factors of different kinds and importance, which all figure in one’s deliberations, and whatever decision is made, rather than evaporating away, obligation cannot be broken without incurring debt in proportion, but other factors may leave their mark in their own ways too. Because we recognise that life is not such that we can all always tidily reconcile every demand that falls upon us, we are usually very forgiving. Whatever the object of moral philosophy, it cannot be the eradication of broken promises.

My difference from both Portmore and Dorsey may appear slight. We agree that an agent’s obligations to others, seen by them as moral reasons, may be overridden by their own interests, seen by them as non-moral reasons. The difference is that, like Prichard, whose view we saw in chapter 1, I don’t think reasons fall into incommensurable categories that must be adjudicated from some external viewpoint; I think the judgment of what one ought overall to do is a moral judgment, rather than a judgment made from a value-free domain of authority external to morality, even where it deems that the agent’s interests override other considerations. Unlike them, I don’t think that those factors that in genuine conflicts cannot be accommodated dissolve away. Unlike them I describe such a judgment as a value judgment, in the cases that interest us a moral judgment, about the relative importance of competing factors, which may include the agent’s good, and that of others, depending on the circumstances. Their coming into conflict in this way makes it a moral judgment – it is a judgment about what the agent may do. The reasons for allowing that self-interest overrides a duty to another, say, will be the assessments of the relative importance of these factors, given the necessary recognition of the moral importance of the agent to an adequate appraisal of the situation. Hence, when self-interest conflicts with other people’s interests, indeed with any important factors, it cannot be assumed that the agent is obliged to make a sacrifice, or that doing so is always morally right. Doing that may only expose them to

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<sup>232</sup> Superson, *The Moral Skeptic*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009), 123, discussed in my chapter 2.

wrongful exploitation of a misplaced readiness to deny themselves, and even nice people will take advantage of gestures of that kind in some circumstances<sup>233</sup> – their being nice does not justify doing so, but it might make them wish it had not been made easy for them. In such a case, not putting self-interest first would be the wrong thing to do, and is a kind of wrong against others too, presenting a temptation, though I wouldn't want to exaggerate the importance of that, human dynamics being so subtle, sensitive and complex and so much of what drives them happening somewhere other than in deliberative consciousness.

## 6. HOW CAN IT BE MORALLY WRONG TO ACT RATIONALLY?

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Part of Portmore's argument for weak moral rationalism is the claim that moral responsibility depends on having the capacity to respond appropriately to reasons of all kinds. He anticipates the objection that what moral responsibility really depends on is having the capacity to respond appropriately specifically to moral reasons, rather than any other kinds of reason. He says accepting this would involve accepting that a morally appropriate response can come apart from a rationally appropriate response, and that acting as one has sufficient reason to act is always rationally appropriate but may not be morally appropriate. Anti-rationalists tend to think this is exactly how things are: "Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger."<sup>234</sup> Portmore rejects this, asking, "Why think that it is morally inappropriate to respond to moral reasons as it is rationally appropriate to respond to them?"<sup>235</sup>

To my ear, that question is: why should we have any moral objection to someone's acting immorally when other reasons pull towards disregarding morality? The short answer to that would be, 'why expect our *moral* response to be to accept acting immorally at any time?' However, the question could also be put this way, 'How can it be rational to blame someone for acting rationally?' and the significance of that rephrasing is in the rhetorical force of reference to rationality: rationality, we may be ready to accept, has at least as much authority as morality, and Portmore wants us to accept that it has more. It seems to me that, when a situation is described in a certain way, as giving priority to self-interest over moral demands, it could be made to appear sensible even if morally wrong, or a wicked violation of morality; described as giving priority to moral demands over self-interest, it could be made to appear

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<sup>233</sup> Recall that Superson wanted to accommodate self-interest within her view of rational moral actions, by means of the concept of impartiality.

<sup>234</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, BkII, PtIII, §III, paragraph 6.

<sup>235</sup> Portmore, *Commonsense Consequentialism*, 51.



admirably self-denying, or puritanically moralistic. As Prichard was aware, the description of a situation is important for understanding its moral significance, and I will expand on that in the last chapter. I have suggested that Portmore's wording is not the apt description of what is happening in cases of conflict. Perhaps Portmore might say that he is not asking about moral blame but, 'how can anyone be *rational*ly blamed for acting rationally?' which is a different question. But I have tried to show that his attempt to redirect blame away from moral wrongdoing and to the contravention of reason, or perhaps only to the subset of irrational actions which are also moral wrongs if that is what he meant to do, is mistaken, and that there is no concept of rational blame if that is blame for errors of reason, even though there is a phenomenon of recognizing authorship of rational error and reacting appropriately to that. Where it is said that no rational error is committed (a person acts rationally, if not morally) this cannot arise; and where it is said that moral error contravenes reason (a person acts both immorally and irrationally) any blame will be moral blame for moral error, even if the action happens also to contravene reason. So that rewording of the question would either try to invoke a non-existent kind of blame (rational blame), or reiterate the question, 'how can it be rational to morally blame someone for rational immorality?' and that looks like a rational thing to do, in principle – I suggested that we do not always in practice blame people for moral contraventions when there are mitigating reasons. If rationality can really dictate that people act morally wrongly, we return to the question that emerged in the discussion of Prichard: why give priority to rationality over morality? I argued in chapter 1 that as Prichard saw it there is no need to do so because what we ought all things considered to do must be acceptable to morality or it will not be rational to do it. In the next two chapters I shall attempt to further clarify Prichard's reasons for thinking that morality needs no external sanction, first by discussing his treatment of the instrumental defence of morality in connection with Plato's claim that justice is in the interest of the agent, and then to take his thoughts further by looking at Murdoch's Platonic conception of the relation between morality and rationality.

## CHAPTER 4 – PRICHARD AND PLATO ON THE SELF-INTEREST DEFENCE

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### SUMMARY

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In chapter 1 I briefly commented on Prichard's rejection of instrumental justifications for acting morally, on the ground that external reasons do not show moral actions to be right, but merely provide incentives to the wavering. In chapter 2 we saw Superson reject Gauthier's contractarian account of the rationality of acting morally, on the ground that while being disposed to act morally is in the agent's overall interests, it cannot prove that every moral act is in the agent's interests. She tried to defend every moral act by offering a conception of rationality on which acting morally is always the rational thing to do, but I argued that this failed. In this chapter I discuss Prichard's more extended argument against that view<sup>236</sup> as he thought he saw it presented primarily by Plato and also Butler. Prichard emphatically opposed the suggestion of a necessary connection between duty and interest because he saw that claim as a threat to morality's autonomy. I argue that he misunderstood Plato's and Butler's claims. Part 1 sets out Prichard's view and his arguments against Plato and Butler. He thinks they aimed to vindicate ordinary morality and made the mistake of thinking that in order to do so they had to show that true justice pays. He thinks ordinary morality is right but that showing that justice pays is irrelevant to vindicating it, and is not true. In Part 2 I explain my understanding of Plato's conception of morality and how he defends his claim that justice is a good to the just person, so that it always makes sense to act morally. Part 3 explains Prichard's mistake in his reading of Plato and Butler. If I am right, it means that Prichard is in broad agreement with Plato and Butler. Even though they claim that it is always in one's interests to act morally, they, like him, do not think that entails either that conducing to advantage makes an action right, or that acting morally is justified by producing advantage, or that the advantage of duty is of the kind Prichard thought – they are not offering an external rational justification. I conclude that Prichard is right to reject the instrumental defence, but wrong to think Plato and Butler gave it. Having now rejected three rationalist defences of morality, Superson's, Portmore's, and the instrumental defence, in the next chapter I assess whether Prichard's position can be seen as antirationalist. In the final chapter, I will examine Prichard's positive view, and suggest it rests on unexamined

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<sup>236</sup> From the paper "Duty and Interest" in Prichard, *Moral Writings*, ed. Jim MacAdam (Oxford, Clarendon Press 2002).

assumptions which, if developed, could be consistent with a Platonic conception of moral rationality as found in the work of Iris Murdoch.

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### 1. EXPOSITION OF PRICHARD'S "DUTY AND INTEREST"

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Prichard argues (1) that Plato and Butler try to prove that duty conduces to the good of the agent; (2) that they do this because they think that even when we know an action to be right,

we will only do it if we think it will be for our good; (3) that they think this because they think that desire for a good to oneself is the only motive of action. Prichard believes duty does not always bring advantage, and therefore advantage cannot be what makes actions right. Since right action does not always bring advantage, it must be possible for us to act other than from a desire for our advantage if we are to act rightly. Prichard thinks our ordinary moral convictions are right but, as he said in “Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?” no rational proofs of these can be given, and here he argues that instrumental justification is no justification. We should do right because it is right, in spite of the fact that it does not always bring advantage.

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### 1.1. VINDICATING ORDINARY MORALITY: HOW PLATO SHOULD HAVE STATED HIS AIM IN *REPUBLIC*

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In Prichard’s view Plato in the *Republic* takes himself to be aiming to refute the Sophists’ theory of morality: that doing what is ordinarily thought right often brings a loss to the agent, so ordinary moral standards are mistaken. Failing to find compensation for loss incurred in doing what are commonly thought to be duties, they concluded that these are not really duties, and ordinary moral opinions are wrong.

Prichard thinks it important to be clear that the Sophists’ theory is about ‘actions thought just’ and not about ‘truly just actions’. Their position is that those actions commonly thought just are not really just; and in taking this as the thesis to be refuted, Socrates allows the assumption that in ordinary life we think but do not know certain actions to be just. So when Socrates states the problem in response to Glaucon and Adeimantus, he is inaccurate. Glaucon and Adeimantus ask Socrates to show that *justice* pays the agent; Plato should have realized they are really referring to “the actions which men in ordinary life think just and unjust.”<sup>237</sup>

He takes it that Plato concedes both Thrasymachus’s presupposition that we ordinarily don’t *know* but only think certain things are just, and that his task is to show ordinary opinion to be right. He says that this is what is meant when it is said that Plato aims to vindicate *morality* against the Sophistic view – i.e. here ‘morality’ means what is commonly thought to be right. So Prichard’s understanding is that Plato thinks he must show ordinary moral standards correct, and that this is what other philosophers have taken Plato to be aiming for.

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<sup>237</sup> Prichard, *Moral Writings*, 25.

According to Prichard, because Plato accepts this as the only way to refute the Sophists, we don't question it. But he thinks that what strikes us on reflection is not Plato's disagreement with the Sophists over the profitability of ordinary justice and injustice (the Sophists think common justice not profitable and Plato thinks it is), but his agreement with their underlying presupposition: that *true justice must be advantageous* – hence they concluded that conventional justice is not real justice, for it is not advantageous (it doesn't yield real power, success, fame and fortune). Nowhere does Plato deny this presupposition and assert instead that whether some action is profitable has nothing to do with whether it is right, which would mean that whatever Thrasymachus says about losses incurred by doing what people think just will not show that it is a mistake to think it just.

Instead of urging that the Sophist contention that people lose by complying with ordinary standards is irrelevant to whether these are truly just, as Prichard thinks he should, Plato in fact treats it seriously, and implies that unless the Sophists can be met on their own ground by being shown that in spite of appearances these actions really are advantageous, “their conclusion that men's moral convictions are mere conventions must be allowed to stand.”<sup>238</sup> So both Plato and the Sophists imply that no action can be truly just unless advantageous to the agent.

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## 1.2. PRICHARD ARGUES THAT THE PREMISE THAT 'JUSTICE PAYS' IS FALSE

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Yet this presupposition “strikes us as a paradox”, says Prichard. For though we can't state what does render an action a duty, we ordinarily think it not conducive to advantage. We do not think that fulfilling duty need bring advantage. Some may try to defend Plato by saying that the advantages he has in mind are of a “superior character” to the ones Thrasymachus is thinking of (Thrasymachus is clearly thinking of such advantages as power, wealth and reputation; those of a superior character might include contentment and a clear conscience). This doesn't help because, “whatever be meant by the ‘superiority’ of the advantages of which Plato was thinking, it is simply as advantages that Plato uses them to show that the actions from which they follow are right.”<sup>239</sup>

The appeal of the presupposition is apparent to Prichard. He concedes that we are often inclined to ask, ‘why be moral unless it pays?’ Some even say if we cease to believe in heaven we would cease to believe in right and wrong, and preachers promise peace of mind

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<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*

rather than worldly gain, so the only difference between these and the Sophists is in the nature of the expected rewards of justice.

Referring to a “well-known passage in the eleventh Sermon,”<sup>240</sup> Prichard finds essentially the same instrumental proof in Butler, and with the same motivation, where “after stating that religion always addresses itself to self-love when reason presides in a man, he says: ‘Let it be allowed, though virtue or moral rectitude does indeed consist in affection to and pursuit of what is right and good, as such; yet that when we sit down in a cool hour, we can neither justify to ourselves this or any other pursuit, till we are convinced that it will be for our happiness, or at least not contrary to it.’” Prichard says Butler is “only distinguished from Plato by going further”<sup>241</sup>: in this sermon he says that virtue consists in pursuing what is right, but that we can only justify the pursuit to ourselves when convinced it will be for our happiness. He reads Butler as maintaining that ultimately there is only one reason for doing anything, and it is that doing it is conducive to our happiness or advantage. He takes him to be asserting a necessary connection between duty and interest “and going further than Plato by maintaining that it is actually conduciveness to the agent’s interest which renders an action right.”<sup>242</sup>

Prichard asserts that it is not sustainable to claim that unless an action is advantageous it cannot be a duty, and even if true it would not enable us to vindicate ordinary moral convictions. He thinks it forces us to allow that advantageousness makes actions right and that this is untenable. To support this criticism Prichard argues that if some other feature is held to render an action right, but that, an action cannot be right unless advantageous, one of two things would have to be proved: either a) that actions with this other feature necessarily advantage the agent, or b) “that the very fact that we are bound to do some action, irrespectively of what renders us bound to do it, necessitates that we shall gain by doing it.”<sup>243</sup>

The first alternative, that the characteristic that renders an action right is not its bringing advantage to the agent but some other feature, entails that actions with this other feature necessarily bring about the agent’s advantage, but in Prichard’s view the relation between this feature and advantage is entirely contingent. The fact of an action’s being, say, a promise-keeping, cannot itself necessitate that it also be advantageous; and whether keeping

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<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

a promise on any particular occasion will be advantageous depends on contingent factors. Keeping a promise, indeed acting as any duty requires, cannot of its nature ensure that we are advantaged by doing it, Prichard thinks, for whether we are better off as a result depends on the particularities of our circumstances. He anticipates it might be argued that we would not have to admit the contingency of this relation if we knew there was a God who always rewards duty; then it would follow that the various dutiful actions would be advantageous.

Prichard does not think that there is one feature that all right actions have, but that different features in different cases render an action right – one action is made right by its bringing about an advantage to a friend, another by its bringing about an improvement in someone's character, and so on. His idea is that whatever it is that renders a particular action right, it is only a contingent matter whether that also happens to bring about an advantage to the agent (for one case of promise-keeping may advantage the agent and another may disadvantage the agent), unless God would guarantee the coincidence of duty and advantage.<sup>244</sup> If God has ordained the world to be such that reward follows upon the performance of dutiful acts, then it could be inferred from the existence of duty, and the world being thus ordered by God, that duty is necessarily rewarded. To know that God has ordained the world thus is to know that there would be no duty but for God who makes it worthwhile. I think.

This claim effectively, in his view, falls back on the second alternative, b) above, that being duty-bound itself necessitates that advantage will ensue, which he regards as no more tenable than the first; it cannot be upheld that the fact that some action is a duty necessitates that the agent will gain, unless it can be shown that this fact entails as a consequence the existence of a God who will reward it: “And this obviously cannot be done.”<sup>245</sup> From these two arguments, Prichard concludes that if it is to be claimed that for an action to be right it must be advantageous, then the necessary connection must be that advantageousness is what makes an action right. And this he takes to be manifestly false: “the fatal objection to maintaining this is simply that no one actually thinks it.”<sup>246</sup>

He explains: taking this view would make it impossible to vindicate our ordinary moral convictions: “For wherever in ordinary life we think of some particular action as a duty, we are not simply thinking of it as right, but also thinking of its rightness as constituted by the

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<sup>244</sup> Note here his understanding of ‘action’: “By ‘an action’ in this context must be meant an activity by which a man brings certain things about.” That is, he is thinking of the important features of actions in terms of ‘what they bring about’, or their consequences. This will be relevant in due course; see §3.3 below.

<sup>245</sup> Prichard, *Moral Writings*, 28.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

possession of some definite characteristic other than that of being advantageous to the agent. For we think of the action as a particular action *of a certain kind*... e.g. ‘fulfilling the promise we made to X yesterday’ or ‘looking after our parents’... If we thought conduciveness to the agent’s advantage renders an action right, we should have to allow that any of our ordinary moral convictions, so far from being capable of vindication, is simply a mistake, as being really the conviction that some particular action is rendered a duty by its possession of some characteristic which is not that of being advantageous.”<sup>247</sup> That is, ordinarily we think that the fact that an action is one of ‘looking after our parents’ is what makes it right, but if it is only conduciveness to the agent’s advantage that renders an action right, then we must be mistaken in this.

He concludes that certain arguments, thought of as aimed at proving that truly right action benefits the agent, turn out to be attempts to prove that the actions we ordinarily think right (looking after our parents, etc.) benefit the agent. Such arguments will not show what they are intended to show, that our ordinary moral convictions are *true*. They stem from the false presupposition that conduciveness to personal advantage is what makes actions right. Plato should have told the Sophists that they may be right in thinking our moral views mistaken, but they had the wrong reason for thinking so, because showing these actions to be disadvantageous has no bearing on whether they are right or wrong. That rested on the false assumption that right action necessarily advantages the agent, which Prichard thinks he has refuted.

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### 1.3. PLATO AND BUTLER CONFLATE SHOWING ORDINARY MORALITY PAYS AND SHOWING TRUE JUSTICE PAYS

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Prichard further finds in both Plato and Butler, besides this attempt to show that actions we *think* right will be for our good, an attempt which they conflated with it, to prove that *genuinely* right actions will be for our good. Since neither, in his view, can answer the question, “What is our duty in detail, and why”,<sup>248</sup> he seeks to identify what misconception led them to make the attempt.

When Plato asked, ‘What is justice?’, Prichard says he was not seeking an account of common usage, which would have been a merely verbal exercise, but to identify the essential feature that makes an action just. But to ask this question, he says, is to imply that his companions can already identify just actions – they must have a “vague apprehension” of

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<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.



the common characteristic to enable them to pick out the appropriate actions. Otherwise, Plato's question would not have been 'what is justice?' but 'what do we think justice is?' Yet the view Plato attributes to the Sophists presupposes that ordinary people only think and do not know what justice is. Making the assumption that justice pays, they think that what we commonly think just does not pay and so cannot really be just. Plato sets out to refute this by trying to show that what we think just does pay, yet he asks not what we think just, but what is, thus assuming that the interlocutors know what it is – can correctly identify just actions, in order to be able to say what their essential common feature is. When Socrates concludes that justice is “conferring those benefits on society which a man's nature renders him best suited to confer”<sup>249</sup>, Prichard says it must be that the interlocutors are assumed to understand this to be the feature which truly just actions share. So Prichard thinks this shows that Plato in the *Republic* is trying to prove that truly just actions are advantageous, and that this is inconsistent with Plato's view of the way the Sophists' view should be refuted.

As he sees it, Plato hopes, by starting with knowledge of what the essential feature of right actions is, and then considering the effects of such actions, it will become apparent that by doing them we shall in the long run become happy. Prichard makes two criticisms of this. Firstly, that we know on general grounds that this kind of proof must fail – as he has argued, it can only be shown that actions having a certain right-making feature will always produce advantage if we can prove the existence of a beneficent God to guarantee that outcome. Secondly, establishing the conclusion that right action benefits the agent in no way helps to establish what actually is right and why. So, he asks, why did Plato think it important to prove that right action benefits the agent?

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#### 1.4. PRICHARD'S DIAGNOSIS OF PLATO'S AND BUTLER'S MISTAKES

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Prichard thinks Plato and Butler try to prove that duty is in the agent's interest because they think that we will only act rightly if we think it will be for our good, and they think this because they think that desire for personal benefit is the only motive of action, a doctrine known as psychological egoism.

##### 1.4.1. WHY PLATO AND BUTLER THOUGHT THEY HAD TO PROVE JUSTICE PAYS

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According to Prichard, Plato assumed that the only reason for which a person acts is the desire for personal good. In Bk VI of the *Republic* Socrates speaks of *to agathon* (the good)

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<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, 31 – obviously a disputable summary of Socrates's conception of justice.

as that which every soul pursues, though he is perplexed as to what it is. This reveals to Prichard why Plato wanted to prove just action advantageous: he wanted people to be just; if he thought that only desire of a personal good moves people, he would think that the only way to induce people to be just is to convince them they will gain thereby.

Of Butler, he says, "... we are driven to find the same attempt to prove that right action will benefit the agent, and to give the same explanation".<sup>250</sup> He reads Butler as saying we can only justify the pursuit of right and good if convinced it will be for our happiness; he says that by referring to those actions to be justified as 'right', Butler implies we already know them to be right, yet by speaking of having to prove to ourselves that they are right, puzzlingly to Prichard, he implies we do not know them to be right. Prichard concludes that Butler put forward two inconsistent doctrines in the *Sermons* without realizing their difference. When Butler speaks of 'justifying an action' he is unaware of the ambiguity between morally justifying an action and showing it to be suited to the achievement of some end. If we understand him to be seeking to morally justify those actions we think right, he seeks to show that they really are right – thinking he can do so by showing them to be for our happiness. This is, he thinks, just what the Sophists and Plato both assumed we had to do. Alternatively, if we understand him to be seeking to justify those actions which we know are right, then to avoid charging him with contradiction, we have to take him to be using 'justify' in the non-moral sense. Otherwise we would have to take him to be saying that even where we know some action is right, we still need to prove that we *morally* ought to do it, which would be contradictory. Given the general drift of Butler's remarks to the effect that conscience yields *knowledge* of what is right, Prichard takes him to be saying that we need to non-morally justify doing what we know to be morally right, and that we will do so by showing that it will lead to our happiness.

The explanation Prichard gives of Butler's thinking he needs to do that is the same as for Plato's – they both subscribe to psychological egoism, the view that we will only act from desire for our personal good. Hence, they both thought that "even though we know certain actions to be right, we must have it proved to us that they will be for our good or happiness, since otherwise, as we act only from desire of our own happiness, we shall not do them."<sup>251</sup> Thus Prichard believes he has established the three theses listed at the beginning of Section 1 above.

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<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-5. Prichard refers to Sermon XI, "Upon the Love of our Neighbour", which can be found in Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons preached at the Rolls Chapel*, Sixth edition. London, 1792, Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale.

<sup>251</sup> Prichard, *Moral Writings*, 35.

#### 1.4.2. PRICHARD REJECTS THE VIEW OF MOTIVATION HE HAS DIAGNOSED

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He describes the view that we won't act as we think right unless we think it will make us better off, psychological egoism, as paradoxical<sup>252</sup>: it implies there is no such thing as moral goodness. If I do what I ought only for my own benefit there is no moral goodness in my action. He calls this "the doctrine that morality needs a sanction"<sup>253</sup> and attributes it to Mill, who evidently couldn't be expected to do better. He also, reluctantly, attributes it to Plato and Butler, who could. However, the doctrine will not "stand the test of instances"<sup>254</sup> as evidenced by his list of counterexamples, e.g. disinterested actions, malicious actions which aim not to make the agent better off but to harm the other person; pursuit of knowledge, the aim of which is knowledge, not personal betterment; conscientious actions.

Prichard takes the view that our only motive is desire for good to ourself to have two negative implications: (1) that the thought that an action is right has no influence on our actions; (2) that there is no such thing as a desire to do what is right, or, a desire to do some action in virtue of its being a duty. To impugn the truth of the view we can deny (1) or (2). Kant denies (1), but Prichard says it won't work: for where we are said to have done some action because we thought it right, though we had a motive for what we did, we had no purpose in doing it – purpose here meaning, "that the desire of which for its own sake leads us to do the action".<sup>255</sup> We have to allow that when we act, we desire to do what we do; but then we have to allow the existence of a desire to do what is right (i.e. to deny (2)). So Kant was wrong in claiming we act from recognition of rightness and not from desire to do right. But if so, we have no need to admit the truth of Plato's reason for trying to prove right actions advantageous. For if there can be a desire to do right, there is no need to maintain that when we know some action to be right, we need also to know it will be for our gain in order to make us do it. To the objection that a desire to do right may come into insoluble conflict with a desire to be better off, with no criteria of adjudication between the two, his "paradoxical"<sup>256</sup> solution is: in such instances, it is inappropriate to speak of a *choice*. It is not necessarily the case that where alternative courses of action exist we must choose between them. He illustrates, "a man contemplating retirement may be offered a new post. He may, on thinking it over, be unable to resist the conclusion that it is a duty on his part to accept it and equally convinced that if he accepts it, he will lose in happiness. He will either accept from his desire to do what is right in spite of his aversion from doing what will bring himself a loss of happiness, or he will refuse from his desire of happiness, in spite of his

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<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

aversion from doing what is wrong.”<sup>257</sup> Whichever action the person does, he will have decided to do it, not chosen to do it in preference to the other action. Prichard’s point could be put as saying that the action performed is insufficient to ground an inference to the conclusion that the person expected to be made more happy by it because people do what will make them less happy if other considerations than their happiness dominate.

Hence, Prichard takes it that the success of the attempts by Plato and Butler to prove that right action is advantageous can be ignored, because the attempt is based on “a fundamental mistake about actual human nature.”<sup>258</sup> I shall look next at what Plato really says about justice and happiness and in Part 3 argue that Prichard is mistaken in his reading, and that the necessity of the connection between duty and interest which he so strongly rejected is not as he conceived it, and not the danger to morality that he thought it to be.

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## 2. EXPOSITION OF PLATO IN REPUBLIC

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Prichard’s interpretation of Plato was, perhaps, not unusual at that time, but in this part I shall give a different interpretation of Plato’s claim that justice is a good to the just person. Plato does think justice necessarily a good to the agent, but, in my view, this involves neither the idea that acting rightly necessarily brings the kind of advantage Prichard has in mind, nor that advantageousness makes actions right, nor the doctrine of psychological egoism.

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### 2.1. SOCRATES QUESTIONS ORDINARY MORAL CONVICTIONS

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Cephalus, prompted by Socrates, reflects on life as a respected elder citizen. Socrates reminds him of the commonplace remark that the difficulties of old age are easier to bear for a wealthy man such as he. Cephalus thinks that character matters more: a good person may find life difficult if he’s poor, but a bad man will not be at peace even if he is rich; as you get older you realize that if you’ve lived rightly, paid your debts, dealt honestly, you have a clear conscience and are at peace with the gods, whereas, if you have wrongs like cheating, lying and unpaid debts on your conscience you approach death troubled and fearful of punishment. This sounds “fair enough” to Socrates but he wants to go deeper. He takes Cephalus’ observations on life as true, but thinks there’s more than just this to living right.

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<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*

He wants a better definition of this than Cephalus offers, as “truth-telling and returning anything we have borrowed”.<sup>259</sup>

Polemarchus supports Cephalus by quoting from Simonides: “it is right to give every man his due”<sup>260</sup> – which they gloss as helping friends and harming enemies. Socrates points out that people often misjudge others – mistake friends for enemies and *vice versa*, in which case, on that definition, it would be right to help one’s enemies and harm one’s friends. Accordingly, Polemarchus qualifies his definition: justice is helping real friends, those who really are good, and harming real enemies, those who really are bad. Already ambiguities are revealed between friends and good people versus enemies and bad people: there seems no necessity that a person’s friends are necessarily good, and enemies necessarily bad. Polemarchus’ revised definition of living right becomes that of doing good to good people and doing harm to bad ones.

Socrates counters that while justice is a human excellence, it is not like medicine and cookery. It has no special sphere of practice: there is no activity of ‘doing justice’ comparable to ‘practising medicine’ or ‘cooking’. Rather, good people use their goodness to make others good; doing good to someone makes them better (off) and doing harm makes them worse (off). Since it can never be right to make someone worse, Socrates persuades Polemarchus that, contrary to his suggestion, the good man harms no-one, not even his enemies, but always does good to others, to make people better, while it is the unjust man who harms others.

It is apparent from this that the gathered company do not see the point of the discussion as primarily to refute the Sophist’s view (which has not been mentioned yet) but to reach a definition of justice, with a view to better understanding what justice is – and, *contra* Prichard, this can only refer to genuine justice. In other words, their aim is to reach a correct definition of justice, since it would be absurd to seek an incorrect definition and unenlightening to survey what people think justice is without assessing whether they are right. Their method is to examine commonly held views, but it is clear their purpose is not merely to reach a true statement of what justice is thought to be, which would be a descriptive exercise – the point, rather, is to see if these mooted candidates for the definition of justice survive philosophical scrutiny.

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<sup>259</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. D. Lee (London, Penguin Books), 1974. 331d.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, 331e.

This exercise would vindicate ordinary morality if these ordinary views turn out to be right, but in advance of discussion nobody knows whether that will be the case, and it is not their stated aim, which is to find out what justice really is. Prichard assumes our “ordinary moral convictions”<sup>261</sup> are correct, and he may not be wrong, but the only way to find that out would be to find out what is truly just, and compare our ordinary convictions with it. Insofar as the views put up for examination may be taken to represent these, it is apparent that justice was thought to be good and to be aimed for, and injustice bad and to be avoided. So it may be that the participants expect the goodness of justice and the badness of injustice to be vindicated, while at the same time, being open to learning something new about what these consist in. But it is open for even that assumption to be overturned, as can be seen from the fact that it does not shock those present when this is done by Thrasymachus. For them the point of dialogue is to submit beliefs ordinarily taken for granted to challenge, without prejudging the outcome. They clearly hoped that the goodness of justice and the badness of its opposite would be vindicated; in that sense the common view might be vindicated, but they need not have assumed at the outset that the common view of what constitutes justice and injustice would survive intact. All this is established before the Sophist joins the debate.

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## 2.2. THRASYMACHUS'S CHALLENGE TO MORALITY: IS IT WORTH IT?

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Enter Thrasymachus, who offers another candidate, “I define justice or right as what is in the interest of the stronger party.”<sup>262</sup> He explains: within any system, rulers decree to the ruled what is in their own interests and not that of the ruled and call it ‘right’; when the masses don’t do as they’re told, they do ‘wrong’. Socrates gets Thrasymachus to admit leaders are fallible; so they may decree what they *think* is but is not in fact in their interests; by his definition that would mean it is ‘right for people to do what is *not* in the interest of the stronger party’ – just the opposite of what he said.

Thrasymachus rejects this interpretation and insists that right is what is *really* in the stronger’s interests. But, he argues, just as a mathematician is entitled to the name when he is calculating correctly and not when he makes mistakes, so the ruler is not really acting as a ruler when in error; so a real ruler never makes a mistake and it is always right to do what is in the ruler’s interest. This appears sophistical: given that actual rulers make mistakes it seems to imply that there are no real rulers. On the other hand, it could simply be the true

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<sup>261</sup> Prichard assumes “ordinary morality” is some definite thing we all know and adhere to, when Plato shows by his very method that people hold unexamined half-formed and conflicting ideas at different levels, and without assuming that these will all be reconciled. He rejects some of Polemarchus’ suggestions, for example.

<sup>262</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 338c.

observation that nobody is perfect and right is only done in an ideal world, and not in this one. Thrasymachus could have accepted the suggestion that real rulers make mistakes but ‘right’ means whatever the ruler decrees, or thinks to be in his interests, i.e. he could have been a relativist about ‘right’, but he does not choose to take that line.

Socrates continues to draw out the analogy with skills: a skilled practitioner aims to do his job well; since the job of a ruler is to rule, a skilled ruler does that well. Thrasymachus rejects this and reasserts his position: as shepherds fatten their flocks for the market for their own profit and not the good of the sheep, so those in political power exploit the people for their own ends. What is called justice is exacted from the weak by the strong and thus, first, “justice or right is really what is good for someone else”, and second, “Injustice... rules those who are really simple and just, while they serve their ruler’s interests because he is stronger than they, and as his subjects promote his happiness to the complete exclusion of their own.” The just man always comes off worse than the unjust, and the more unjust the latter is, the better off he’ll be: more money, popularity, freedom and power – so, third, “justice is the interest of the stronger party; injustice the interest and profit of oneself.”<sup>263</sup>

There appear to be self-contradictions in Thrasymachus’s account and it is not clear that there is a coherent position to be extracted from it.<sup>264</sup> Perhaps Plato intends to expose the Sophists as shifting positions for the sake of argument rather than trying to present a coherent thesis. On the other hand, the Sophist must be seen to have a point, or the debate cannot be serious. Prichard and others would not have thought Plato’s main aim in the *Republic* was to refute the Sophist’s theory of morality if he had thought the position too puerile to address. Clearly Plato takes it seriously.

Amongst the difficulties with Thrasymachus’s view is that, if ‘justice is serving the interest of the stronger party’ by definition, then it is right for anyone to serve the interests of whoever has dominion over the state – right for the ruler, and for the ruled, to do what the ruler says. By itself, that is a kind of relativism and may be tenable – his references to different forms of rule, each of which regards as ‘right’ whatever benefits the rulers, suggest he may hold such a view. But, if it is to be taken together with ‘justice is the interest of someone else’ then there is a difficulty about how we should understand the position of the

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<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, 344c.

<sup>264</sup> Whether there is or not is a subject in itself, of which I have only superficial knowledge. See for example, Julia Annas, *An Introduction to Plato’s Republic* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1981), p.35; T. Irwin, *Plato’s Ethics* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995), p.174-180; Rachel Barney’s article “Calicles and Thrasymachus” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*; Ralph Wedgwood, “The Coherence of Thrasymachus”, <http://www-bcf.usc.edu/~wedgwood/Thrasymachus.pdf> (accessed 23/09/2014).

ruler, the stronger party, because now it looks as though the rulers are to serve someone else and not themselves – which is clearly not what Thrasymachus intended. I would read this as perspectival, intended to be taken from the point of view of the oppressed, with whom Thrasymachus identifies here, and not that of the oppressor – their doing what their rulers decree benefits someone else, namely, the rulers, and not those who are compelled to do it, them. That is consistent with the first definition, and gives an opinion on justice so defined from the point of view of those who do not benefit from it.

Taking his third offering as it stands, again justice and injustice are described from the perspective of the weaker party – they are not supposed to profit themselves but someone else, namely the stronger party, so it would be right for them to obey their rulers who thereby profit, and wrong for them to disobey and profit themselves; but the stronger party, presumably, think that profiting themselves, and not their subjects, is the right thing for them to do. I take it that Thrasymachus is being ironic; in saying that justice is serving someone else's interest while injustice is serving one's own, he means that if people act in ways that their society calls just and avoid what it calls injustice, by obeying the decrees of the powerful, they will in effect serve someone else's interest and not their own – and by implication this is not a desirable state of affairs, at least from the perspective of the powerless. So it would seem that Thrasymachus is not proposing that right is simply obedience to local custom, which, as a matter of fact serves the ruler's own interests, nor that it is right to do 'whatever serves the ruler's interests', regardless of the actual dictates of conventional morality, but is showing contempt for the state of society, because it hypocritically calls 'right' what in fact serves the ruling party, and is in fact wrong.

When Thrasymachus goes on to say injustice rules the naïve or unsubtle, and the just always comes off worse than the unjust, he must mean that the genuinely decent person is being taken advantage of by the cunning and powerful to profit themselves. He illustrates with examples which by ordinary standards are cases of unfair dealing and corruption in which the just person comes out worse off, including avoiding taxes while the honest pay, and taking advantage of office to do favours for acquaintances while the honest official incurs the resentment of family and friends for resisting their appeals. He observes cynically that people tend to applaud the extremely unjust person who exploits others to the maximum and gets away with it while they vilify anyone who tries to do so and gets caught, not because they have any aversion to doing wrong but because they do not want to suffer it. Thrasymachus must mean 'justice' and 'injustice' in their ordinary senses here – both in that the sorts of action he lists under justice and injustice are in line with ordinary standards, and in that, justice, whatever it requires, is regarded as to be done, and injustice to be avoided.



He doesn't commit himself to these value judgments; rather his point is that, given this view of justice, people clever enough and strong enough to get away with injustice won't comply because injustice promises greater rewards. He rather despises those who do right, as weak and simple-minded, but his saying that depends on his agreeing that what they do is indeed right at least by ordinary standards. It is also apparent that what he takes to be the advantages of injustice are such worldly rewards as wealth, popularity, licence and power.

Socrates is unperturbed; he repeats that injustice does not pay better than justice even when the former is completely without obstruction. Here he is disagreeing that injustice pays, whatever it consists in. Thrasymachus insists justice does not pay and injustice does, but he has been referring to ordinary standards of justice. Socrates declares that this is simply false. It may look as though he is defending ordinary morality. He may be doing so; but equally, he may only be defending one part of the ordinary view, that justice is good and injustice is not, without expressing any view as to the content of justice (without commitment to either the definitions or the illustrative examples Thrasymachus put forward). All he need be saying at this point is that it pays to be just, whatever that is, and it does not pay to be unjust, whatever that is – and that if they consist in following the conventional standards Thrasymachus has alluded to, then ordinary morality pays, but if not, it does not. Ordinary morality has figured in the discussion in the definitions mooted, and the proffered illustrative examples, and Socrates has dismissed these as inadequate – not necessarily because what has been suggested is not just, but because it has not captured the essence of justice. Thrasymachus has gone further, not only questioning what counts as just, but claiming that justice as practised has unacceptable costs and that therefore the unjust are better off. Socrates does not argue with Thrasymachus about what justice demands, nor does he deny the costs; rather, he denies that, whatever these amount to, they will exceed the costs of injustice.

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### 2.3. JUSTICE AS A CONDITION OF THE SOUL OF THE JUST PERSON

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Socrates goes on to identify the virtues of the skilled practitioner, qualities needed to conduct any activity well, and therefore to rule a state justly. He represents justice as a sort of expertise manifesting knowledge, wisdom, courage and restraint, and injustice their opposites. Since Thrasymachus thinks injustice is profitable and justice not, he reverses things, attributing these qualities admiringly to the unjust person, as it takes these qualities to turn situations to one's advantage. Socrates replies that the truly skilled do not try to outdo each other but aim at the same mark, the standard of excellence in their field, whereas it is

the unskilled who seek to outdo others indiscriminately in hope of maximizing their gains. Therefore those virtues belong to the good and just person, while the unjust is ignorant, unwise, pusillanimous and greedy. The analogy shows Socrates's conception of the virtue of justice as a kind of self-mastery involving knowledge – as a musician must know his instrument to get the best from it in performance, so the just person could be said to know humanity, to have a conception of the ideal of humanity which he tries to realize in his own person.

At this juncture, Socrates teasingly claims to have shown what justice is, but although Thrasymachus appears discomfited he does not really concede the point. Socrates readily admits that he has not yet proved anything – what constitutes just action, whether justice is a virtue or whether it makes its possessors happy.<sup>265</sup> He has, however, clarified the aim of their discussion. Thrasymachus articulates the strongest challenge to morality, so while Plato's aim is to refute this, it is not just to do so in order to bolster views such as those of Cephalus and Polemarchus, but to reach, if possible, the right definition, and a deeper understanding, of genuine justice. Thrasymachus says injustice is in every way better for the unjust person, denying just what Glaucon urges Socrates to prove, that justice is desirable for itself as well as for what we can get out of it. So Prichard is right that Socrates must refute his claims, but the central claim is that justice is not profitable, not whether ordinary views are correct. Thrasymachus in fact accepts that ordinary standards are correct, in order to claim that injustice pays, but questions the value of adhering to them when it brings disadvantage.

Glaucon urges Socrates to carry on and convince the company that it is better in every way to be just than unjust. He makes a distinction amongst kinds of goods: those valued for themselves (harmless pleasures); those valued both for themselves and their consequences (wisdom, sight, health); and goods we find unpleasant in themselves but which we value for their consequences (exercise, medical treatment, earning one's living). Though many would put justice in the last category, as a necessary evil, Socrates says it is sought both for itself and its consequences. Common opinion has it that justice costs but is worth it for the benefits, but this implies it would be better if we could reap the benefits without paying the costs. Socrates prepares to defend the view that it is worth having for itself apart from the benefits – that there is something good about being just besides what it brings to the agent. He implies that the ordinary benefits are not the only reason justice is worth having, though he does not seem to think these totally irrelevant. Perhaps the ordinary benefits he has in mind are a clear conscience and being pleasing to the gods, as decent Cephalus suggested,

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<sup>265</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 354b.

rather than wealth and peer esteem which Thrasymachus rightly doubts will always accrue; but perhaps he also implies there is nothing wrong with wealth and peer esteem when these accrue to the just person for being just.

What Glaucon wants from Socrates regarding justice and injustice is “to be told exactly what each of them is and what effects it has as such on the mind of its possessor, leaving aside any question of rewards or consequences.”<sup>266</sup> It looks as though Glaucon wants to have faith in justice in spite of the undermining doubts expressed by Thrasymachus – but he has phrased his request in terms of a quite different kind of reward from that which Thrasymachus values; he wants to know about what justice does for the mind – *psyche* – of its possessor, not for his standing in the world.

By way of articulating the challenge to Socrates, he restates Thrasymachus’s argument in three parts, as follows.

1) The common opinion of the nature and origin of justice is that it is by nature good to inflict wrong and bad to suffer it. Since the disadvantages of suffering harm outweigh the advantages of inflicting it, in self-interest people make a compact to forgo the advantages to avoid the disadvantages, and what the law lays down they call ‘right’. Hence, justice is a matter of convenience; self-interest is natural but to keep order society arrives at the morality system as a compromise – its only authority is people’s consent to abide by it.

2) Those who practise justice do so reluctantly, under compulsion and not because they think it good. If they had Gyges’ ring with magical powers to make them invisible whenever they wanted, no-one would do right willingly; they do it only to avoid punishment. Anyone who could get away with wrongdoing would be a fool not to.

3) This conduct is reasonable because the unjust man has, by common reckoning, a better life than the just man.<sup>267</sup> Compare two men and see which of the two is better off: first, a perfectly unjust man who has a reputation for the highest probity, able to ‘get away with murder’; he becomes rich and makes all the right sacrifices so the gods favour him; second, a perfectly just man who has a reputation for the worst injustice. The former will live a happy life, the latter will be tortured, beaten and finally crucified. So ordinary people think, “A better life is provided for the unjust man than for the just by both gods and men.”<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, 358b.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, 358c.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, 358e—362c.

In short, Glaucon puts forward, for Socrates to refute, a contractarian view of justice – a rational justification for acting rightly: what justifies acting rightly is that ordinary people who follow the rules will in the long run benefit more than if they don't. Socrates goes about refuting this indirectly. He starts from a depiction of a perfectly just state, and draws an analogy between that and justice in the individual, going via a description of the ideal education system, underlying which there is the question of the origin of evil<sup>269</sup> – the education of future citizens must keep them pure, even to the point of protecting them from corrupting literature and arts. The gods must be represented as perfectly good, so that nothing evil can enter their experience. Justice prevails in the state when each of the three classes of citizen fulfils their own role thus contributing as they should to the proper functioning of the whole state – and this must be under the wise direction of the rulers. The rulers are fitted by natural intelligence and suitable education to cultivate the knowledge and personal qualities needed to guide and rule society. By analogy, justice in the individual is a state of harmony amongst the three elements of the soul with reason in command of appetite and *thumos* (spiritedness). Injustice arises from conflict or imbalance amongst these when reason is not in control.

This part of the dialogue provides an illustration of the sort of person such a state and education would produce, and the kinds of difficulty that occur when they fail to live up to the ideal qualities described. For example, people, in whatever role, craftsman, prophet, physician or shipwright, must be truthful, or they are likely “to capsize and wreck the ship of state.”<sup>270</sup> Someone with the appropriate natural endowments and so educated would have the discernment to recognize what is fine and good, and their opposites, and thus be best fitted to conduct themselves and the state in the right way. To become such a discriminating judge of the good and the bad takes many years, and is unlikely to be achieved by a young man or woman. However, just as animals can be selectively bred over generations to produce the ideal specimens, so such a society is likely to get better over time as imperfections are eradicated; there will not even be need for detailed laws concerning contracts, harbour-charges, assault or slander, because “Good men need no orders”<sup>271</sup> as Adeimantus approvingly contributes.

From all this, taking justice as a state of the properly cultivated soul, it seems to become apparent that when sound judgment reigns in the individual, the just person will never

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<sup>269</sup> The implicit question is whether evil enters the human predicament via nature or nurture.

<sup>270</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 389d.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, 425e.

embezzle money, steal, commit sacrilege, betray friends or country, or do any other kind of wrong. Thus, Socrates says, their enquiry has revealed that justice does not principally concern outward matters but a person's inward self.<sup>272</sup>

“Well, then, if we claim to have found the just man, the just city, and what the justice is that is in them, I don't suppose that we'll seem to be telling a complete falsehood”<sup>273</sup>, announces Socrates. It is not clear he has met the main challenge – to show that, despite appearances, it is always better to be just than unjust. But Glaucon appears to be so satisfied with the understanding of justice they have now reached that he thinks it already apparent, saying, “this inquiry looks ridiculous to me now that justice and injustice have been shown to be as we have described”, for even if one had power and every material comfort, “life is thought to be not worth living when the body's nature is ruined. So even if someone can do whatever he wishes, except what will free him from vice and injustice and make him acquire justice and virtue, how can it be worth living when his soul – the very thing by which he lives – is ruined and in turmoil?”<sup>274</sup>

It is true that Socrates has yet to address whether justice pays. What has been achieved is an understanding of the nature of true justice as Socrates sees it. However, to Glaucon it has become obvious that, if this is true justice, it can only be better than injustice – and the reason he gives is in terms of the effect on the soul of the just person, regardless of his outward state. Just as life is not worth living for someone who has everything anyone could want but whose health is wrecked beyond recovery, so the life of an unjust person with all the rewards of unchecked licence is not worth living because the state of his soul is ruined. The implication is that, in the same way as the very sick have no use for the good things they have, so it is for the unjust person.

Glaucon is satisfied that justice is better than injustice; nevertheless, Socrates has more to say. Book VI describes the personal qualities of the just person fit to rule the ideal state. They must love wisdom, and acquire the highest form of knowledge, knowledge of the good, since this is what every soul pursues.<sup>275</sup> Prichard says that here Plato speaks of *to agathon* as that which every soul pursues though perplexed as to what it is, but from other sources he concludes that by “an *agathon*” Plato means a source of personal satisfaction or happiness and that “we do what we do because we think it will be better for us to do so.”<sup>276</sup> While

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<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, 443d.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, 444a.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*, 445b.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, 505e.

<sup>276</sup> Prichard, *Moral Writings*, 33.

Socrates admits he is unable to fully account for the good I see nothing here to warrant an interpretation that relativizes it to the agent, as seeking a good for themselves. The allegories of Sun, Line and Cave are intended to elucidate. These are open to interpretation of course; mine is that in this context he is seeking to explain what ‘the good’ or ‘goodness’ is, not ‘a good’. He says, “What the good itself is in the intelligible realm, in relation to understanding and intelligible things, the sun is in the visible realm, in relation to sight and visible things.”<sup>277</sup> As the sun illuminates objects enabling the eye to see clearly what is visible, so the good illuminates the objects of knowledge enabling the mind to understand clearly what is intelligible. In the light of the good we may have true understanding; knowledge of the good is necessary to seeing things truly. These are of course images, but I know of no literal form of words that could convey his meaning. I would say Plato is expressing the idea that such truth as is humanly attainable can only be attained through thinking well, and to think well requires virtue – courage, generosity, restraint, honesty; and hence, that what counts as thinking well is itself a matter for the wise to judge. Plato does of course think that such enlightenment is a source of happiness; but in quite a different way from Prichard’s idea of “an *agathon*” as the good of satisfied desire, however laudable its object. That is why Plato can say that knowledge of it is essential to the ideally virtuous person; knowledge of the good enables sound judgment about how to conduct oneself and matters of state.

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## 2.4. THE HAPPINESS OF THE JUST SOUL

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In Book IX, after describing four imperfect types of society exemplifying four corresponding imperfect characters, Socrates ranks them in order of happiness, to contrast the perfectly just man, the philosopher ruler, with the perfectly unjust man, the tyrant. The truly just man has knowledge of the forms especially the form of the Good, understanding, wisdom. He cannot be bought by flattery or bribes or be tempted to profit by wrongdoing because he knows these will not bring true happiness. Self-control, justice and understanding are worth more than health and strength, and the sound judgment of the just person will keep all such things in balance. Happiness, *eudaimonia* (sometimes translated ‘blessedness’, though all translations are problematic) is the condition of someone who has knowledge of the good, and a rightly ordered soul, which fit a person to address life’s challenges. Plato does not conceive *eudaimonia* solely as a psychological state, a mood; the happiness of the just person is a condition of being rather than how they feel. In this context, we are indeed thinking of the beatific state of the ideal soul which may well involve happy mood as well as a good moral state, but the term could be attributable to a person even when for humanly

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<sup>277</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 508c.

understandable reasons they are unhappy, yet no less *eudaimon* for that. That is why in the *Gorgias* Socrates can argue that a man can be happier on the rack than enjoying the fruits of injustice.<sup>278</sup> Socrates himself, as Plato portrays him, was the model of justice, and, as described in the *Apology*, for example, while he might be said to face death with equanimity, it is not because his prospect is pleasant but in spite of the fact that it isn't.<sup>279</sup> This is Socrates's answer to Glaucon, who wanted to know what justice is and "what effects it has as such on the mind"<sup>280</sup> of its possessor, leaving aside any question of rewards or consequences.<sup>281</sup>

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## 2.5. IS TRUE HAPPINESS ONLY FOR IMMORTALS?

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However, while these qualities would make an ideal ruler in an ideal world, Socrates says, "I doubt if it will ever exist on earth." Why would that be improbable? In Book VI Socrates seemed confident that, though difficult, it was in principle possible for people with the right natural endowments to attain knowledge of the good and the corresponding qualities required to establish and rule the ideal state.<sup>282</sup> Such people would be able to impose justice on a populace grateful for the imposition from without of order they are not wise or strong enough to maintain from within, and thus put into effect the best possible social constitution, as far as fate permits. Here Socrates seems to doubt its feasibility. The ideal ruler would refuse to accept honours that might tend to corrupt, and would evidently therefore decline to engage in politics in the real world, "unless some divine good luck chances to be his."<sup>283</sup> Now he has come to think the establishment of the ideal state cannot be achieved without a miracle. We cannot get there from here by trying. Fallible humanity seems doomed to try and fail to achieve happiness, not just because fate intervenes but because flawed in their nature, as Book X reveals.

The suggestion that the ideal society may not be realizable prepares the way for Socrates to defend the claim that the chief prizes of goodness are in the next life and not in this. So he sets himself to prove to Glaucon that our souls are immortal.

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<sup>278</sup> Plato, *Gorgias*, 473c.

<sup>279</sup> Plato, *Apology*, 36a-42a.

<sup>280</sup> The translations of *psyche* sometimes use mind, or soul – these have accreted undesirable connotations, but a form of words is needed here which can differentiate between an occurrent state of mind, a disposition, and the moral condition of an individual. In English the word 'soul' can do that work provided it is taken without religious and metaphysical connotations, as in common use it often is.

<sup>281</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 358b.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*, 499d.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, from 592a.

He says that if we want to see the soul as it really is, we should look at it, not as it is now, deformed by association with the body, but in the pure state which reason reveals to us, which it had before birth and will return to after death. Then we shall be able to clearly distinguish justice and injustice and the other qualities identified. The true nature of the soul becomes apparent to us when we look at what it loves, and that is wisdom. The soul's attraction to whatever is divine, immortal, eternal and free from mortal impediment reveals its kinship with these things. Hence "justice itself is the best thing for the soul itself"<sup>284</sup> – better than any rewards for seeming just, and would be worth doing even if we had Gyges' ring. The gods favour the truly just and the rewards of justice on earth are as nothing to the rewards hereafter.<sup>285</sup>

Socrates's argument for the immortality of the soul is less than compelling. Then we must ask how critical his argument for immortality is for his defence of justice as inherently good for its possessor apart from what it might gain. Contrary to Socrates's claim, given the specific defect of the soul, wickedness, it seems to make perfect sense that the soul can be harmed by it, as the body by disease. That is what Plato has maintained up until this point. That would explain why the soul can be made better by goodness,<sup>286</sup> and why it is better to be good apart from any external rewards and advantages and in spite of any disadvantages. Rai Gaita once mentioned in conversation a comment by Peter Geach on Socrates's remark in the *Gorgias* that a good man cannot be harmed. Geach objected that he can be harmed: by becoming wicked. That seems to me exactly right, though possibly not as Geach meant it. When Socrates says a good man cannot be harmed, he means that no *external* harm can affect the goodness of a good man – loss of friends, reputation, position or wealth, and pain, disability, even death, do not harm one who steadfastly adheres to the good. As long as their soul cleaves to the good it is unblemished. But if they succumb to hardship, cruelty, temptation or provocation, as anyone may since real people are not invincible, by stealing, falsely confessing or causing harm, then they have been harmed, not by hunger, pain or damage, etc., indeed succumbing to temptation is likely to bring such harms to an end, at least temporarily, but by becoming a wrongdoer – something that can happen even to a virtuous person, since attributions of virtue depend on dispositions to behave well, and to become a wrongdoer needs only one error.

The problem with that is that Plato thinks the soul is immortal, and claims that it exists in its pure state in the afterlife, where the best rewards of justice are received. The question is: is it

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<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, 612b.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, 614a.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, e.g. 608e.



possible consistently to maintain that the best rewards of justice accrue to the good person regardless of whether their soul is immortal – that is, can we make sense of the idea that it is still worth being good for itself, quite apart from worldly rewards, if there is no heaven? Or does Plato’s argument about the value of goodness depend on the truth of a doubtful claim about the immortality of the soul?

The truth of Plato’s central claim in my view does not depend on the success of the argument for immortality. Indeed, if justice is worth pursuing only for rewards of a better kind in a better place, we are back with external rewards, albeit of a “superior character”, as Prichard read him to mean.<sup>287</sup> As I read him, Plato’s central idea is that the rewards of justice are internal to doing justice, and whether or not there are further rewards in heaven, those internal rewards are the ones that make it possible to claim justice is worth doing for its own sake. The internal good of doing good is, as Geach intimated, in remaining incorrupt. In or by doing good, one makes oneself good. In or by doing evil, one makes oneself evil: makes of oneself an evil thing. That is not an attribution of virtue or vice, a habit of behaviour, a tendency of character, or a disposition to behave – a readiness, so to speak, to act well that has been noticed by others who have come to expect and rely on it, a predictor of future behaviour; nor is it an assessment of the quality of one’s contribution to humanity.<sup>288</sup> The statement perhaps seems vacuous, obvious, lame and too weak to provide the sort of justification of acting rightly that might have been hoped for as the outcome of this dialogue. I think it would be a mistake to take it that way. There is only one way to be good, and that is by being good: ‘being good’ in this sense is not ‘behaving well’, ‘preserving virtue’, but being, constitutively, good, and one is what one does in a sense deeper than character. That it is a feature of human finitude that we persist through time involves the necessity of having to persist in being good: holding to the good in the face of temptation to err. One is free to prefer the external rewards of injustice, on the ground that ‘being good’ is too weak an incentive to act justly when sanctions are unlikely to ensue – the benefits may appear to be worth the cost, if this is all that ‘being good’ amounts to. But one cannot change, one cannot escape, that effect upon the doer of injustice that Socrates has shown necessarily accrues. The idea of the good shines a light on the harm of wrongdoing to the soul, so the truly just person who has knowledge of the good will not find the benefits of wrongdoing attractive. If one does wrong, one becomes a wrongdoer. There is no distance between a wrong done and

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<sup>287</sup> Prichard, *Moral Writings*, 26.

<sup>288</sup> Geach, in *The Virtues* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977), says people need the virtues as bees need their stings (p.17): so he perhaps meant by the remark mentioned earlier that the wrongdoer thereby becomes a vicious character, one to whom the trait of vice may be attributed; that construal does not do justice to Socrates’s reference to having found the ‘inward’ nature of the good of justice, because it represents the value of doing good as an instrumental good for the agent, and for the polity, and this is not Plato’s meaning.

the agent of it, the evil of it belongs to the agent constitutively; it doesn't just stick so it cannot be washed off, it is structural damage.

### 3. CRITIQUE OF PRICHARD ON PLATO ET AL. AND DUTY AND INTEREST

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#### 3.1. PRICHARD'S ARGUMENT ABOUT PLATO'S REAL AIM IN *REPUBLIC*

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Prichard thought Plato should have aimed to vindicate ordinary morality. He thinks Plato thought that to vindicate morality he had to show it pays, and conflated refuting Thrasymachus, by showing ordinary standards do pay, with justifying true morality, by showing it pays. Prichard thinks that whether justice pays or not is irrelevant to vindicating it, since the only reason to do right is because it is right, and not for what it gains. He thought Plato thought he had to give an instrumental justification because he subscribed to a false theory of motivation, psychological egoism, so we would not act rightly unless we will benefit thereby.

Plato in fact aims to define true justice, rather than vindicate ordinary morality, and to show it pays, but not because he subscribes to psychological egoism. He does not think ordinary moral convictions are without error. He wants to give a better understanding of justice and also to show it worth pursuing. This may be intended to strengthen people's resolve to do what is right, but his justification is not instrumental. Socrates nowhere denies that acting justly is personally costly but this does not affect his claim that it is better for the agent despite the costs, and the reason why it is better is internal, or constitutive, and not external. Prichard rejected external reasons, but did not think there was an internal reason.

#### 3.1.1. REFUTING THRASYMACHUS, VINDICATING ORDINARY MORALITY: DOES PLATO MISSTATE HIS AIM?

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Prichard says we tend to think Plato in the *Republic* aims to show that by doing our duty we shall be happy but that, in his view, Plato's main aim is to meet Glaucon and Adeimantus' request to refute the Sophist theory of morality.

The Sophist view according to Prichard is: that the actions uncritically thought right, e.g. paying a debt, helping a friend, obeying the government, in fact bring a loss to the agent; but

what is truly right must be advantageous; so these actions are not truly right and ordinary morality is an illusion.

Taking this as the theory to be refuted means Plato has to maintain “the opposite theory”<sup>289</sup> about the same actions. The actions in question are those uncritically thought just, as opposed to actions which actually are just (which may or may not be the same set of actions). Prichard explains that the difference is important because we either know something or do not know it; so our ordinary unquestioning attitude must either be one of knowing or of believing, and there is no third alternative. The Sophists took our uncritical attitude to be one of thinking or believing but not of knowing, for it would not make sense to claim that the actions we ordinarily know to be right are not right. If we know they are right, our judgment that they are right must be correct. It cannot be claimed that actions known to be just are not just. If it is claimed that these actions are not just, then our mental state cannot be one of knowing, but only of thinking or believing. So the Sophist view must be expressed as the view that actions ordinarily thought just are not really just. Prichard says Plato takes it that the theory he must refute is that our ordinary beliefs are mistaken, and that in so doing Plato implies his agreement with the Sophists that we ordinarily think, rather than know, that certain actions are right. Therefore we must represent the view as referring to actions thought just, and not to just actions.

In that case, Prichard says, in responding to Glaucon’s request, Plato stated his task inaccurately, for if his task is the refutation of the Sophist view, it is not that of showing that truly just actions are profitable, as he in fact put it, but of showing that those actions uncritically thought just are profitable – Plato ought to be aiming to vindicate the ordinary uncritical view of justice, and not true justice, by showing that actions ordinarily thought just are profitable.

It is not untrue that Plato wants to refute the Sophist view as stated above; but what amounts to an “opposite theory” depends on which of the Sophist contentions is denied. Prichard thought the opposite view was that we know our ordinary convictions are correct, which was his own view. He took it that Plato accepted the Sophists’ assumption that we did not know them to be correct, and wanted to show that they in fact are. Equally, another way to oppose the Sophist claim would be to argue that morality is not an illusion, and, whether our ordinary convictions are correct or not, true justice does indeed pay. This is in fact what Plato does. We see from the opening conversation with Cephalus and Polemarchus as well

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<sup>289</sup> Prichard, *Moral Writings*, 24.

as later in the dialogue that he wants to identify true justice and explain why it is better than injustice both for what it brings about and in itself. Merely refuting the claim that ‘what is ordinarily thought just is not really just’ could fall short of that, depending on what it turns out to involve. One way of doing that would be to establish what our ordinary convictions are and then show them to be correct, thus demonstrating that what is ordinarily thought just is indeed just. Plato starts by eliciting people’s unreflective thoughts, but does not try to show them correct. He says Cephalus’ suggestions are fair enough, but finds flaws in those of Polemarchus – two cases of ‘ordinary views’ – and thinks neither gets to the heart of the matter. Another way would be to establish the nature of true justice, and hope to find that our ordinary convictions conform to it. Plato is certainly occupied in establishing the nature of true justice, but he makes no effort to show that it coincides with ordinary convictions, so it would seem the vindication of ordinary morality is not his preoccupation. Should it have been? If he succeeds in identifying the nature of true justice and showing that true justice pays he will have refuted the Sophist view; but it should then be apparent whether ordinary views are correct or not, and better than that, he will have vindicated true justice.

It seems to be true that Plato allows the Sophists their claim that we accept certain moral judgments uncritically. To have denied this, in the way that Prichard wanted, would be to have claimed that we know these things to be right and wrong, rather than merely accepting them uncritically. Plato need not accept this; he could, and I think does, allow that at least some ordinary beliefs may be correct without assuming they are – he does not, for example disagree with Cephalus, but wants more than examples of just actions – and does not set about trying to show that Cephalus is right, or take this as evidence that our ordinary beliefs are correct, but rather as evidence that we do not have deep understanding of what justice is because merely knowing examples is not enough. But it would be quite odd to try to show our beliefs correct if he thought that we already know they are. Further, it is not clear how one would go about showing all particular moral beliefs correct, still less that we know this. Moreover, that those present each offer somewhat different examples and definitions of justice, which are not obviously consistent with each other, and which Socrates subjects to questioning, suggests that Plato’s acceptance of the Sophist assumption that we ordinarily think but do not know certain actions to be just is entirely reasonable, and obviously true. Plato subjects our ordinary beliefs, about whatever subject, to critical reflection, and does not assume anything, as Prichard does.

To vindicate the ordinary view of justice must be to show that those actions thought just really are just, but it might also be to show that these actions, rightly thought just, are worth

doing. It might be a common moral conviction that justice is worth doing;<sup>290</sup> but it might be, and seems amongst this group to be, an equally common view that it is not – that is the point of their dialogue. One reason to show it is worth doing is precisely because it doesn't look that way. So when Plato sets himself to show that justice is advantageous, *contra* Prichard he means to show that true justice, whatever it is, is advantageous. It is a further and subsidiary matter, to establish the content of justice – in fact Plato has Socrates and Adeimantus agree that highly detailed rules will not be needed in the ideal society, because just people will know what to do.<sup>291</sup> A just person will not embezzle money, commit sacrilege, betray friends or country or dishonour his parents. Ordinary moral convictions may also judge these sorts of action unjust, but the establishment of items on the list is of far less importance to Plato than establishment of the nature of the just soul from which right action emanates because the just person has the wisdom to make sound value judgments in the light of knowledge of the good.<sup>292</sup>

### 3.1.2. SCHEMATIC PRESENTATION OF PRICHARD'S ARGUMENT

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Thrasymachus's argument:

- P1** p, q, r... are actions ordinarily thought just
- P2** p, q, r... do not bring rewards
- P3** true justice brings rewards
- C1** p, q, r... are not truly just (and maybe there is no justice, or there is natural justice)

Prichard's argument:

- P1** p, q, r... are actions ordinarily thought just
- P2** p, q, r... do not bring rewards
- P4** true justice does not bring rewards
- C2** p, q, r... may or may not be truly just – reward is irrelevant to whether an action is truly just

i.e. Prichard denies P3 and thinks Plato should have done so.

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<sup>290</sup> See Lesley Brown's suggestions as to what "ordinary moral convictions" might be in her paper, "Glaucón's Challenge, Rational Egoism and Ordinary Morality" (2007), 44-46. [http://www.philosophy.ox.ac.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0008/1115/Glaucón.pdf](http://www.philosophy.ox.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/1115/Glaucón.pdf) (accessed 10/08/2014).

<sup>291</sup> *Republic*, 425e.

<sup>292</sup> This is particularly apparent in the passage at the end of Bk IV, 441d-444e, where the nature of justice in the individual is discussed, showing how Plato regards justice and injustice as analogous to health and sickness, and thus sees right actions as those that issue from a soul with its parts in balance under the guidance of knowledge of the good.

But Prichard thinks it happens to be a fact that

**C3** p, q, r... are truly just since our common moral beliefs are known by intuition, hence correct

Socrates's argument:

**P1** p, q, r... are actions ordinarily thought just

**P2** p, q, r... do not bring rewards (of the kind Thrasymachus refers to)

**P3** true justice brings rewards (though not of the kind Thrasymachus refers to)

**C4** p, q, r... may or may not be truly just depending on what kind of reward they bring.

i.e. Socrates agrees with P2 and P3 only on a different understanding of rewards.

### 3.1.3. PLATO MISSED A CHANCE TO REFUTE THRASYMACHUS BECAUSE HE ACCEPTED A FALSE PREMISE

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Prichard said that Plato inaccurately stated the aim of the dialogue as that of showing that true justice pays when, to refute the Sophist, he should have stated it as that of showing that what we *think* just pays. This is what, according to Prichard, Plato really thinks he is trying to do. Prichard says Glaucon and Adeimantus also want from Socrates a demonstration that what is thought just benefits not only a person's reputation but their soul.<sup>293</sup> In Plato's attempt to do this, in addition to accepting, as explained above, that we do not know but only believe certain things to be right, Prichard notes that Plato also accepts, instead of calling into question, the Sophist's presupposition that for an action to be really just it must be advantageous. This is the third premise in Thrasymachus's argument presented schematically above.

Prichard's main contention is that this presupposition on the part of Thrasymachus is simply wrong. He sees no reason why one should expect doing one's duty to be in one's interest, and thinks that experience shows that it is not. Because Thrasymachus assumes that true justice should bring rewards, he validly infers that the actions which go by the name of justice in ordinary life cannot really be just. At least, the conclusion is legitimate if the rewards of justice are taken to be those that Thrasymachus refers to, namely, popularity, power, wealth and licence, which do not follow upon keeping to ordinary standards. Prichard seems to accept that these would indeed be the rewards, and that they are clearly not forthcoming when a person acts rightly.

The response of Socrates to Thrasymachus is to persist, in spite of what has been said about the disadvantages of justice, in his claim that justice really pays and injustice does not. So

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<sup>293</sup> Prichard, *Moral Writings*, 25; Glaucon and Adeimantus use the word *psyche*.

Prichard takes it that Plato disagrees with Thrasymachus over the profitability of actions ordinarily thought just. Plato has Socrates repeatedly insist that just acts are advantageous, but this need not and does not in fact contradict Thrasymachus's claim about the external disadvantages of justice as ordinarily understood. Rather, Socrates never at any point denies that these indeed accrue to the person who complies with justice in the world as it is – here he can be taken to be referring, as Thrasymachus is, to the person adhering to ordinary standards of justice. So Prichard is mistaken in thinking that Socrates believes, contrary to Thrasymachus, that acts ordinarily thought just are indeed profitable in the way Thrasymachus would want.

Prichard thinks this because he thinks Plato accepts the presupposition of Thrasymachus's argument, that true justice pays. It is this assumption that allows Thrasymachus to draw the conclusion that what we think just is not really just. Prichard thinks it obviously false, and thinks Plato should have denied it. He thinks it obviously false, because he agrees with Thrasymachus, as Plato does not, on what he takes the advantages of justice to be. If those are the advantages that ought to accrue to justice, then justice by ordinary standards does not gain them. Plato does not deny that justice pays, but as he shows by the end of the book, these are not the advantages he has in mind when he says that true justice pays. Prichard is mistaken in thinking that Plato thinks that *true justice* yields the advantages that Thrasymachus wants.

Had Plato denied the assumption that true justice pays, as Prichard thinks he should have, then no conclusion would follow about whether what we ordinarily take to be right really is right, because, as Prichard says, whether acting thus rewards the agent or not is unrelated to whether such actions are right. Since Plato accepts that true justice pays the agent, Prichard thinks he has made a mistake. Prichard seems to think the most important thing to do would be to show our ordinary convictions to be correct, and that by allowing that justice is advantageous Plato has missed an opportunity to show that Thrasymachus has failed to undermine them.

Prichard said that showing that true justice pays does not have any bearing on which actions are just, and hence on whether the actions we ordinarily think just really are. But if true justice does pay, then, if an action does not pay, it cannot be just. If it does pay, it may be just. That it pays does not prove it just, but only that it may be. But if Plato succeeds in proving that *only* true justice pays, or, put another way, that the rewards of true justice are of a special kind that does not accrue to other actions, then any action that pays in that way is a just action, and if any actions ordinarily thought just are amongst them, they are thereby

vindicated. In my view, this is exactly what Plato does in *Republic* and thus he refutes Thrasymachus and more: he does not establish that, *contra* Thrasymachus, our ordinary convictions are true, but that, *contra* Thrasymachus, there is such a thing as justice, and it is always better than injustice.

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### 3.2. IS THE PREMISE THAT JUSTICE PAYS REALLY FALSE?

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Prichard calls the presupposition “a paradox”<sup>294</sup> because “though we may find ourselves quite unable to state what it is that does render an action a duty, we ordinarily think that, whatever it is, it is not conduciveness to our advantage.” He recognizes the appeal of the thought in light of the familiar facts that we ask ourselves why we should do our duty just when we feel it unduly burdensome and that many other philosophers have thought that “any action which is right must justify its claim to be right by being shown to be for their own good.” Butler, in the eleventh *Sermon*, expressed a similar idea: “Let it be allowed, though virtue or moral rectitude does indeed consist in affection to and pursuit of what is right and good, as such; yet that when we sit down in a cool hour, we can neither justify to ourselves this or any other pursuit, till we are convinced that it will be for our happiness, or at least not contrary to it.”<sup>295</sup> Prichard sees this as going a little further than Plato and asserting a necessary connection between duty and interest by “maintaining that it is actually conduciveness to the agent’s interest which renders an action right.”<sup>296</sup> Prichard thinks the claim being made by Thrasymachus, allowed by Plato, and endorsed by others, is that “unless an action is advantageous it cannot be a duty”, and that this entails that it is “advantageousness and nothing else which renders an action right.”<sup>297</sup>

Taking it that he has clarified the view of Plato and Butler in this way, Prichard thinks it is obvious that no-one would make this claim: “For he will be involved in maintaining not only that it is a duty to do whatever is for our advantage, but that this is our only duty. And the fatal objection to this is that no-one actually thinks it.” He thinks that holding this view would make it impossible for us to vindicate our ordinary moral convictions: “For wherever in ordinary life we think of some particular action as a duty, we are not simply thinking of it as right, but also thinking of its rightness as constituted by the possession of some definite characteristic other than that of being advantageous to the agent. For we think of the action as a particular action of *a certain kind*”, e.g. fulfilling a promise we made to X yesterday or

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<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>295</sup> Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons preached at the Rolls Chapel*, 166.

<sup>296</sup> Prichard, *Moral Writings*, 27.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*



looking after our parents; “we should never, for instance, think of using as an illustration of an action which we think right, telling X what we think of him, or meeting him in London, even though we thought that if we thought of these actions in certain other aspects we should think them right.” If we thought conduciveness to the agent’s advantage renders an action right, “we should have to allow that any of our ordinary moral convictions, instead of being capable of vindication, is simply a mistake, as being really the conviction that some particular action is rendered a duty by its possession of some characteristic which is not that of being advantageous.”<sup>298</sup> He means: it would follow that our thinking of a promise-keeping, etc. itself as right would be mistaken, because promise-keeping after all is not what makes it right but rather its advantaging the agent; showing an act to be one of promise-keeping would not show it to be right; an act of promise-keeping, if it were right, would have to be shown to advantage the agent. Utilitarianism looms, and we saw in Chapter 1 that he thinks advantageousness never the feature in virtue of which an action is rendered a duty.<sup>299</sup>

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### 3.3. PLATO AND BUTLER SHOW THAT TRUE JUSTICE PAYS

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According to Prichard, Plato and Butler conflated the attempt to show ordinary standards advantageous with the attempt to show true justice advantageous, and this cannot refute the Sophist view and show our ordinary convictions true.

He sees Plato’s strategy in Book IV as that of identifying the essential feature of truly right actions (“serving the state”<sup>300</sup>), and then considering the effects of such actions, in hope that it will become apparent that doing them in the long run makes us happy. Prichard’s objection, as outlined above, is that only a divine Being could effect the coincidence of duty and reward, and that in any case proving that right action benefits the agent cannot tell us what our duty is.

But as I read him, Plato does not think that “serving the state” (or whatever he defines justice to be) is criterial for justice, the feature that renders an action a duty. Each part of the whole performing its role renders the whole harmonious under rational rule, and that is justice in state and individual. So Plato thinks of justice as the ideal way to be, but the good of it is not the consequence of just acts but of the fact of acting justly, whatever feature made the deed just and whatever the external consequences of its having been done. Nor is Butler

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<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-30.

<sup>299</sup> See ch.1, §4.1.1, and §5.1.

<sup>300</sup> Prichard, *Moral Writings*, p.32.

claiming advantage to be the right-making feature. In the quoted passage<sup>301</sup> he assumes we know what duty demands, namely, the “pursuit of what is right and good”. Butler gives no indication that we identify the specific action required by finding a common right-making feature – rather the indication is that like Prichard, he thinks we will know it in the situation. Knowing that duty requires pursuit of right and good, we then ask what justifies our pursuing it, and he answers that doing so makes us happy. Indeed, he says that any pursuit needs such justification – which is to say that we may question the value of pursuits in which we have other reasons to engage, and the value of pursuing them is shown when doing so makes us happy. Butler must mean that it makes us happy to do the right thing, rather than that doing this thing, which happens to be right, is a pleasant activity (which claim need not be denied, but is not necessary to the happiness that acting rightly brings), still less that doing this thing is made right by its making us happy. Regarding other pursuits in need of such justification, it must be that whatever commends them to us as activities, the test of their worthiness of pursuit is whether we are happy to do them: and that cannot mean they are worthy if we derive pleasure from engaging in them, but that they are worthy if we can be happy that we do them, rather than, for example, being ashamed or feeling we have wasted our time; this happiness gives a seal of approval to our acting in ways which may or may not themselves please. So, both Plato and Butler can agree with Thrasyarchus that doing right might bring tangible disadvantage, yet hold that it is entirely compatible with this that we can be happy because we did what was right.

Prichard is thinking of an action’s advantages as the good in the resulting situation caused by the action itself, as he says, “By ‘an action’ in this context must be meant an activity by which a man brings certain things about.”<sup>302</sup> He is focussing on the external consequences of the action, and has in mind the causal chain of events effected by the action done that results in some state of affairs that can be described as making the agent better off. Neither Butler nor Plato is thinking of the good of an action to the agent as what it brings about in this sense. Adeimantus wanted to be convinced that doing right has an effect on the soul of the agent apart from any external consequences. The effect on the soul is internal to acting rightly, and not an external upshot. But it is not psychological; it is not an effect on one’s character; it is not good or harm to reputation, or to self-esteem; it is not a resultant state of affairs. Perhaps one could say that what one does affects one’s standing, or one’s being, but this could be misunderstood – it is not integrity that is affected, for example. Doing right constitutively affects one’s goodness by keeping it intact; doing wrong defiles it.

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<sup>301</sup> quoted above, §3.2.

<sup>302</sup> Prichard, *Moral Writings*, 27.

Both Plato and Butler think an action is rendered right independently of advantage, but that doing right necessarily advantages a person, in this special way expressed in terms of happiness. So it would be true that if someone was observably advantaged in this way then we could infer that they acted rightly; but this would have nothing to do with their being better or worse off in their circumstances from having acted in that way. However, this sort of advantage is not observable, material, or circumstantial and we don't tend to infer from it to the rightness of any action (except perhaps that we might infer from someone's beatific demeanour to the goodness of their soul and deeds; but we don't often meet saints and angels – one might think of the nun in Gaita's account of his life<sup>303</sup>). Rather, from the rightness of someone's action we can say that happiness accrues to them, so it is not a sign, or a feature, of actions which are right; it accrues to the person who does what is right, for doing what is right. When we say it accrues to the person – making them happy – we do not mean that acting rightly qualifies them as virtuous or renders them more virtuous; we mean it constitutes them happy.

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### 3.4. IS PRICHARD'S DIAGNOSIS OF PLATO AND BUTLER'S MISTAKES CORRECT?

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In Book VI of the *Republic* Prichard finds Plato expressing the view that a person's actual motivation in acting is the “desire for some good to himself and that only”, psychological egoism. He takes this from Plato's speaking there of *to agathon* (the good) as that which every soul pursues and for the sake of which it does all it does. He draws confirmation from other sources, including the *Philebus*, and of particular interest is what he says about the *Gorgias*, which he takes to justify his concluding that wherever Plato uses the term for a good he means by it “a source of satisfaction or a source of happiness to oneself.”<sup>304</sup> The relevant passage from the *Gorgias* is where Plato aims to show that what rhetoricians and tyrants do is not what they really wish to do, by maintaining, as Prichard interprets him, that in all actions, even when a person kills someone or despoils them of their goods, they do what they do because they think it will be better for them to do so.<sup>305</sup>

This understanding of Plato's view of motivation provides Prichard with the explanation he needs for Plato's having thought it necessary to prove right actions would benefit the agent. For if a person's only motive of action is to receive a good to themselves, then to provide

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<sup>303</sup> Rai Gaita, “Goodness beyond virtue”, in *A Common Humanity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Abingdon, Routledge, 2002), 17-27.

<sup>304</sup> Prichard, *Moral Writings*, 33.

<sup>305</sup> Prichard does not give references, but this can be found at *Gorgias* 466d-469c.

people with a motive for acting rightly it must be necessary to convince them that it will make them better off to do so.

However, in the *Gorgias*,<sup>306</sup> Plato does not say people want only their own good. He says people want what is truly good but do not always rightly judge what that is. People are often mistaken in their judgments of what is good, and this could be the case, amongst other times, when they get what pleases or satisfies them or what they prefer. When someone does what they think good, and it is actually bad, he does what he pleases but not what he wills, because what he wills is what is truly good, and that is not what he has got. A person who gets what he sees fit – what he thought was good but isn't really – is miserable and pitiable, because he has not got a good thing but has got a bad thing; he has not in fact been benefitted but has in fact been harmed. So, against Prichard's reading, according to Plato a person's actual motivation is a desire for what is truly good; and they go wrong when they misjudge what is good and aim for and get something bad instead. That thing may appear good to the agent, and may give satisfaction, because it is exactly what they aimed for, and got; but if it is not good, then, as Socrates puts it, it is not what the person truly wants, for people truly want only what is truly good. The corollary would be that once they see that it is bad it can no longer be an object of desire, for it will not bring genuine happiness. This is not psychological egoism.<sup>307</sup>

So Prichard is wrong to think Plato had a view of human motivation on which each person's sole motive of action is the desire for a good to himself. If Plato thinks that people do already seek the good when they act, then it is unlikely that he thinks he needs to provide an inducement to people to do it by showing that doing right will benefit them. For he would surely take it that, given that all seek the good, all that is needed for them to act rightly is that they correctly identify the good – and hence the parts of the *Republic* aimed at elucidating the idea of the good, including Book VI to which Prichard refers. Clearly he thinks knowledge of the good is difficult to attain and likely to be reached by the gifted few, and those without it will not be capable of governing the ideal state or mastering their own souls. Equally clearly, it would seem that when he has Socrates seek to satisfy Glaucon's demand for a demonstration that doing right is a good to the agent, Plato does not see himself as providing an additional external inducement to do right to people who know what it is but are reluctant to do it.

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<sup>306</sup> *Gorgias*, from 467b.

<sup>307</sup> In this my interpretation differs from that of Lesley Brown in "Glaucon's Challenge, Rational Egoism and Ordinary Morality" (2007), [http://www.philosophy.ox.ac.uk/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0008/1115/Glaucon.pdf](http://www.philosophy.ox.ac.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0008/1115/Glaucon.pdf) 47, (accessed 10/08/2014).

Prichard thinks Butler has the same reason to prove right action advantageous. He thinks Butler failed to distinguish the moral from the non-moral ‘ought’ and falls into error by sliding from one to the other without realizing it. The moral ‘ought’ is categorical, and has the implication that one is morally bound to do the action; the non-moral ‘ought’ is hypothetical, and only implies that the action in question is conducive to the agent’s purpose. This yields two senses for the phrase ‘justifying an action’; the first involves showing the action to be morally right, and the second involves showing it to be a means to the agent’s purpose. In order to avoid having to charge Butler with contradiction when he speaks of justifying the pursuit of right and good by convincing us it will be for our happiness, we have to take him to be saying that even when we know an action to be morally justified, we need to non-morally justify our doing it by showing that it will bring benefit.

As I read him, it is right that if Butler thought he was providing an external non-moral inducement to moral action for those who recognize what it is but find it unappealing, then he would have been ‘justifying’ morality in these two different senses without contradicting himself. But that is not what he is doing. The passage occurs in a sermon about the commandment to love our neighbour as ourself, in which Butler argues that there is not, as commonly thought, any “contrariety between self-love and the love of our neighbour”.<sup>308</sup> When Butler speaks of our needing, in a cool hour, to show that doing what is right and good will be for our happiness, he does not mean it must be shown to be conducive to an improvement in our circumstances, and he does not think we need this inducement because our sole motive is desire of personal good. He means that doing what is right makes us genuinely happy, regardless of whether it is for our pleasure or the satisfaction of any preference unless formed in light of what it is good to want or prefer. Butler maintains that the satisfaction of getting what we want is not true happiness unless the object of our desire is a truly good thing: genuine happiness is incompatible with doing wrong. So there is no conflict between our interests and what is morally required. Contrary to Prichard’s claim, he argues that the common view of acting from “self-love”, seeking our own happiness to the exclusion of others’, is erroneous. We desire many objects, our own happiness being just one. Insofar as we desire our own happiness as an object, we seek nothing definite, and are likely to become miserable; if we desire definite objects, happiness is the satisfaction of getting what we want; but we will not be truly happy unless what we want is truly good, and the good of others is chief amongst such things: “Self-love does not constitute this or that to be our interest or good; but, our interest or good being constituted by nature and supposed,

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<sup>308</sup> Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons*, 166.

self-love only puts us upon obtaining and securing it.”<sup>309</sup> We can pursue objects (revenge, riches) in the belief that they will bring happiness; but whether they will bring genuine happiness is determined by “nature” and not by us – when we pursue what we ought, we are truly happy.

So, like Plato, Butler thinks that doing right is conducive to genuine happiness, but he does not think producing happiness is a criterion of right action. He appeals to happiness not to identify which actions are right but to persuade listeners who know what is right that, contrary to common opinion, doing it is not contrary to their interests. But since we have many motives in acting, his aim is to show that acting for the good of another is really in one’s own interests whereas revenge, which is equally directed to the satisfaction of a self-referential desire, is a motive it is not in one’s interests to have or to act on. He argues that one can only attain true happiness by fulfilment of desires for things other than one’s own happiness, and self-love, when it is appropriate, seeks the satisfaction of its proper desires. Self-love is only one amongst other motives. It may prompt us to gratify our various desires, but happiness comes only when appropriate desires, and these include a desire for the good of others, are satisfied.

In short, Prichard is wrong to think that the reason why Plato and Butler offer an instrumental justification of acting rightly is because they think we act only from desire for our own good. Neither subscribes to psychological egoism; neither offers an instrumental justification. In fact they would have broadly agreed with his arguments against the latter view, which are that the view implies that we never have the motive of duty, or a desire to do what is right, when it is clear that both Plato and Butler counted this amongst our proper motives; and that we in fact have many motives and not just one, and these include acting for the good of another – something Butler explicitly says.<sup>310</sup> They both offer an internal justification that says acting rightly is better for the agent regardless of external consequences. As they see it, the good for the agent is not the agent’s motive, but a consequence of doing the right thing which is done without regard for the consequences to the agent and with regard for what justice requires. When an agent believes, as they do, that doing the right thing is good for the agent, it does not follow that the getting of this good becomes the agent’s motive or reason for acting. What justice demands remains unchanged by the fact that doing it is good for the agent, and the just agent does what justice demands because it is right. The internal justification is offered by way of encouragement, because to outward appearances justice is often costly to the agent: they are not saying that contrary to

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<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

appearances, duty has no costs, but that, less obviously, these are compensated for in a better way.

In the next chapter I will assess moral rationalism and the implications of Prichard's rejection of attempts to rationally justify moral action for his position in relation to that view.

## CHAPTER 5 – ASSESSMENT OF PRICHARD AND MORAL RATIONALISM

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### SUMMARY

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In this chapter I shall attempt to draw the conclusions from my arguments in the previous chapters. We can now assess whether Prichard was a moral rationalist or an anti-rationalist. I argue that while we might simply describe him as anti-rationalist and leave it at that, if we did so we would miss an opportunity to draw out the implications of an important difference between Prichard and both of those views as well as missing something important in his positive remarks on moral rationality. Prichard wanted to preserve the objectivity of morality while denying external validation, which sets him apart from either side of the opposition as presented. To the extent that he had a positive view, it sits better with that of Plato, who might be described as a moral rationalist, but of a different kind from the contemporary sort, than with anti-rationalism. The important difference between Prichard on the one hand and rationalists and anti-rationalists on the other is that the latter share a presupposition that Prichard implicitly rejected, that if morality is to be rationally underpinned then it must be so externally, by means of a morally neutral rationality. Plato on the other hand saw that in order to judge truly, in any sphere, we must judge in light of the Good, or more prosaically, that all judgments, including judgments of rationality, express value. In assessing the rationality of action, far from being able to do this in isolation from moral considerations, one needs values in order to make the judgment at all. In the next chapter I shall give a brief outline of a Platonic view of the nature of moral thinking and moral rationality as found in the work of Iris Murdoch. Her view is much more developed than that of Prichard but retains his insight.

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## 1. DOES PRICHARD THINK IT BETTER TO DO RIGHT THAN WRONG?

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Prichard rejects Plato's and Butler's defence of right action because he reads them as giving a prudential argument for acting morally – as giving non-moral reasons to act morally. He thinks they believe that acting morally makes the agent better off in ways that are not essentially moral, and that unless this were true people would not heed morality because they have only one motive in acting, which is to gain a good for themselves. I have argued that he is mistaken in his reading of Plato and Butler. In my view what they are doing is explaining why it is better to do right than to do wrong. I have tried to show that this does not amount to offering a prudential reason to do what morality requires, on which the gains promised are of the usual non-moral kind, but rather, adverts to the constitutive nature of justice in the soul of the just person.

Prichard rightly rejects the prudential argument because he is in no doubt that doing the right thing in fact often disadvantages people in ordinary ways. It is this very fact that prompts them to wonder if it is worth it, which observation was the starting point of Plato's discussion. It is also a fact that there can be gains or compensations of the same non-moral kinds for doing what must be done, for example, a person could gain in popularity, have the satisfaction of seeing things go well, or enjoy the gratitude of others, and so on. These matters are however contingent on circumstance and therefore there can be no guarantee of personal benefit in these terms from doing the right thing. Prichard did not ask whether it was worth it, but why we should do what's right, and that is in part why he misread Plato who did argue that it is worth it, but not in the way Prichard thought. Prichard made clear he thought that in any case the outcome of acting rightly was irrelevant because it could not make an action right; more importantly, in his view, there is only one reason to do the right thing and that is because it is right and not because of any good or advantage it might incidentally bring.

In spite of his awareness of the disadvantages of duty, I believe Prichard would not have denied that it is better to do right than to do wrong. It is clear that he thought, where conflict arises, that morality always overrides self-interest no matter what the personal costs. He thought of the personal costs in terms both of such relatively minor matters as inconvenience or forgoing legitimate pleasures as well as making more significant sacrifices and the sorts of things we could think of as changing, even ruining, a person's life. Given that he thought

that acting morally cannot be guaranteed to reward the agent and should never be done in order to gain reward, Prichard must then answer the question asked of Socrates by Glaucon and Adeimantus: why then is it better to do right than do wrong? If doing right can cause harm, in the familiar sense just described, and no compensatory good, then what is the good of doing right?

It seems to me that this is the question Plato and Butler addressed, and, *contra* Prichard, gave a tenable answer. But if I am right that Prichard would not have denied that it is better to do right than wrong, then all three in fact agree. Plato tried to explain why this is so. Prichard merely leaves us to infer that he must think so, or implausibly, that he thinks we must do right even though it is not better in any sense than doing wrong. He cannot have argued as he did and yet have privately thought it consistent to believe that it is better to be unjust at least when the cost of justice is high. In a perfectly ordinary yet indispensable sense of ‘better’ – and by indispensable I mean none of the familiar alternatives will do, such as ‘more beneficial’, ‘more just’, ‘more rational’, let alone ‘more convenient’, ‘more correct’ or ‘more expedient’ – which is the sense of ‘better’ that we find in Plato, Prichard must have thought it better to do right than do wrong. This sense simply means ‘more good’.

Need he, however, have answered the question? He pronounced it an illegitimate question, for reasons I discussed in chapter 1, namely that he thought morality autonomous, and that the all-things-considered ‘ought’ is a moral ‘ought’, so that once one has in some situation come to recognize what morality requires, no question could arise of having to further justify acting in that way by reference to some additional reasons outside morality. However, he did not distinguish between the prudential answer, which he thought wrong, and Plato’s real answer, as I have interpreted it. If he had understood Plato, would he then have thought the question legitimate? Is it wrong to think that it can be answered? One answer to that might be that Plato did attempt to articulate an answer. Obviously people debate his success, or put another way, it is not unanimously agreed what question he was addressing or what his answer was, let alone whether it was correct. But if Plato’s view is as I have interpreted it, as set out in the previous chapter, then it seems he succeeded in giving a reason why it is better to be moral. Could Prichard consistently have accepted it had he understood it in this way, without conflict with his other views on morality? I think he could.

Prichard need not then have been as disappointed in Plato as he seemed to be when he said he didn’t expect better of Mill but did of Plato, “whose moral earnestness is that of a

prophet”,<sup>311</sup> because their views turn out to be compatible. It is possible to accept Plato’s view that doing right makes the agent happy without denying the fact that it often exacts a high cost in non-constitutive goods. But we may still ask whether the rarefied conception of happiness Plato thinks necessarily pursuant on doing the right thing renders too impure for Prichard the doing of right for right’s sake – must he continue to insist that happiness is totally irrelevant? If Prichard would have thought that, I think he would perhaps have been thinking, in the same way as Kant did, that any conception of happiness is tainted by association with the empirical, with desire originating in the self, ultimately associated with pleasure, and I think it would have meant that he remained resistant to acknowledging the difference in kind between the happiness he recognized and the happiness Plato spoke of. I think it would not have gone against his arguments in “Duty and Interest”,<sup>312</sup> which are directed against instrumental attempts to justify morality, if he were to acknowledge that there is a kind of happiness that he had not considered there which is not affected by those arguments. His arguments in that paper can stand, against there being a necessary connection between doing one’s duty and being psychologically happier, materially better off, practically advantaged or personally benefitted or gratified. The happiness that necessarily comes with doing justice and being just on Plato’s conception is unaffected by those, and Prichard could consistently have agreed.

I recognize a complication in this, and it is that Plato does seem to have regarded perfect happiness of this kind to be unattainable by mere mortals – he eventually said his utopia was impossible for us to achieve.<sup>313</sup> What I think he thought unattainable for us was an enduring and incorruptible state of complete harmony of the soul, such as he imagined would exist after death. But since he believed that justice is necessarily good for the soul, I think he also believed that in so far as justice is humanly possible, and he did believe both that almost any individual can act justly<sup>314</sup> on occasion and that fortunate individuals can become fairly decent people, mere mortals will have a measure of that happiness, or at least, intimations of it. This may perhaps be interrupted happiness, alloyed happiness, dependent on the vicissitudes of life and on human frailty, but nonetheless, in so far as they pursue the good, and to the extent that they do what is right, they are constituted happy thereby. Prichard simply did not think in these terms, and that is why his argument against Plato aims at the wrong target, but I see no obstacle in his overall view to his accepting this.

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<sup>311</sup> H. A. Prichard, *Moral Writings*, ed. Jim MacAdam (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2002), 26.

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-49.

<sup>313</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 592b.

<sup>314</sup> I don’t know if he thought some people beyond redemption, but I don’t think this affects my point.

## 2. WAS PRICHARD A MORAL RATIONALIST OR AN ANTI-RATIONALIST?

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First, a summary of the arguments thus far. I've argued that a valiant attempt by Superson to prove a strong version of moral rationalism true fails. I've argued that a weaker version of rationalism, offered by Portmore, on which morality is not always overriding, also fails. I have argued against an instrumental justification of morality. Of course that certain arguments fail does not entail that the thesis to be proved is not true.<sup>315</sup> However, it has been my purpose to suggest that the reasons for their failure imply that the enterprise, at least on their terms, cannot in principle succeed. I have also rejected a weak version of anti-rationalism, and below I shall give reasons to reject the strong version. Such considerations are rarely conclusive, but I believe the considerations I have offered, and those to follow, present a tenable argument that morality cannot be externally justified, but that this does not exclude it from rationality, since the relation between rationality and morality is internal. This conception of rationality, as I see it, does not undermine the enterprise of moral philosophy or philosophy in general.

The proof of strong moral rationalism foundered because the attempt to define rationality in a way that would not beg the question in favour of morality while showing moral action rational fell short of its aim. Superson tried to show that it is always rational to meet a moral demand and always irrational not to do so, by offering an account of rationality that would show that we always have most reason to act in ways that respect humanity, because this is demanded by constraints of consistency and impartiality. I argued that Superson's conception of practical rationality does not necessarily cover the right set of actions, since some morally right actions may be both partial and consistent, but more seriously, it is not the morally neutral conception of rationality that she needed because it incorporates the concept of impartiality, which is a moral concept, thereby building morality into rationality.

Portmore's objection to strong moral rationalism was that it appeared to make morality excessively demanding, rendering actions irrational that to him looked perfectly reasonable. This is particularly true when consequentialism is the theory taken to stand for 'morality' but the Kant-inspired universalizable impartial morality that Superson favoured could be seen to be susceptible to the same charge. In Portmore's view there are times when moral reasons do not override non-moral, especially prudential, reasons. There are times when morality costs too much and he thinks it is not rational to act morally on those occasions. Morality is only

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<sup>315</sup> Also, moral rationalism is not a unitary position, so my arguments may not apply to other versions. I think they apply to any version that holds a value-neutral conception of rationality.

rational when it comes at a reasonable price. What Portmore in effect does in forging this view of moral rationality is to change morality so that it doesn't ask too much. He says, "I reject any moral theory ... that requires agents to act contrary to the requirements of reason."<sup>316</sup> Thus, if he thinks a moral requirement too demanding he demotes it, stripping it of its status as a requirement. Since he cannot strip it of its identity as moral, his tactic is to deprive it of its power to require, leaving it able only to commend – it can provide reasons, but they do not have automatic priority over other reasons. This he achieves by proffering a revised version of act consequentialism as the moral theory that makes it turn out rational to be moral, by excluding absurdly onerous moral obligations, on his preferred conception of rationality, that of acting in self-interest. Duty is in this way determined by what counts as rational. I argued that Portmore failed to convince that moral considerations can lose their force when important considerations of self-interest compete, and so failed to establish a weaker version of moral rationalism whereby duty extends only over rationally (self-interestedly) justified actions.

Since the enterprise of proving that it is rational to act morally depends on matching a theory of rationality to a theory of morality, the obvious thing to do, if one wants the outcome to be 'that it is rational to be moral', that a person "can be morally required to do only what she has most reason to do all things considered",<sup>317</sup> is to tweak either or both theories until the desired match is obtained. The oddity of this enterprise is that in practice it yields strange views both about what rationality is and about what morality is – strange, that is, by comparison with familiar notions of rationality and morality, by which I do not mean with some hypothetical ordinary person's or ordinary collectivity's putative beliefs about these, but with the actual varied array of natural uses of the concepts with all their differences in different contexts. More importantly, the nature of this strategy must be open to question. I do not suggest that people are never wrong in their use of words, but given the egregious discrepancy between the preferred definitions of rationality and the variety of ordinary uses of the concept, it seems an arbitrarily stipulative exercise to maintain that people are wrong and philosophy (some philosophers) right on this. Is it legitimate to stipulate what morality and rationality are in these relatively arbitrary ways, in order to get the right fit, hoping that the theories in question are true, consistent or coherent or whatever a theory must aim for? Perhaps the answer to that depends on how convinced we are by the respective accounts of morality and rationality. If so, I have suggested the accounts given are short of compelling. An equally rational strategy would be to allow that the assumptions driving the stipulation –

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<sup>316</sup> Douglas Portmore, *Commonsense Consequentialism: Wherein Morality Meets Rationality* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011), 5.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*

that ‘rationality’ must be a unitary notion, must be decidable in all cases, must be a matter of consensus – may be mistaken, and that there may be some significance in the fact that actual use does not fit the preferred definition. The strategy makes assumptions about what morality demands, and depends on the reader’s agreement, and it is far from obvious that this will be forthcoming; in my own case, as I have said, it is not. When was it established that consequentialism, to take a popular moral theory, is *the* right one, and what would the claim mean?<sup>318</sup> Suppose virtue theory, to take another example, should turn out to be the correct theory; would it yield different moral verdicts, would it align with rationality defined in one preferred way or another, what would be the significance of its doing or not doing so? When was it established that rationality is doing what is in one’s interests, or taking the means to one’s ends, and nothing else? When did it stop being obvious that aiming to meet one’s obligations is a perfectly rational way to behave – perhaps not necessarily or invariably rational, but likely to be thought so, without being dogmatic about it?

I argued in chapter 3 that Dorsey’s argument for a weak version of anti-rationalism, denying rationalism’s claim about the rational supremacy of moral reasons, identified weaknesses of rationalism but did not convince on its positive claim, that moral justification is sometimes superfluous to rational justification, hence, that one can have sufficient non-moral reason to act even in the face of a contrary moral requirement. I objected on the ground that I found his arguments as counterintuitive as he found the claim intuitive. Since we have a clash of intuitions, neither of us has clinched the argument. I would add that in effect Dorsey assumed rationality to be equivalent to self-interest, as did Portmore, and both can be charged with making a stipulative definition of rationality such that it will hardly be surprising if morality fails to meet it, but as I said above, that strategy is in my view suspect. Both assumed their definition of rationality and did not defend it. We are not under pressure to accept that acting rationally is acting in self-interest and nothing else. Ordinary language makes use of the concept of rationality in more varied ways such that acting in accord with

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<sup>318</sup> I am not clear what a moral theory is. The difficulties with the idea of moral theory are too complex to go into here; I will mention a few. Sometimes it is said that a theory is a model of actual moral practice, and sometimes of the way practice ought to be if we were perfectly rational, or perfectly good. Some writers suggest a moral theory should be able to guide action or appraise actions done; it seems to me the two amount to the same thing, since whatever reasons could justify a proposed action could equally be given to evaluate action already done; but in any case, how in life would one go about using, applying, a theory? How can we know if a theory is correct? It is common practice to compare the ‘deliverances of theory’ with one’s ‘intuitions’ and if one doesn’t like the deliverances, one tweaks the theory. In that case, it seems people are in practice working on the assumption that Prichard was right that we intuitively know what is right. But if this is our methodology, then we can manage without theory, it is idle, because theory must answer to intuition which already knows what to do. If intuition must bow to theory, then there has to be proof, or consensus, that the theory is right, or there will be no bowing. Such proof or consensus seems not forthcoming – is that because we are not clever enough, or are there principled reasons preventing it?

moral demands, for the sake of meeting moral demands, from recognition that a situation requires one to act in a certain way, will often be intelligibly and uncontroversially deemed rational behaviour and cannot without distortion be described as acting in self-interest – Prichard made this point in “Mistake”, as we saw in chapter 1.

Strong anti-rationalism finds attempts to provide a justification in terms external to morality unsatisfactory. It concludes that moral rationalism is wrong, and that reason is outside the sphere of the moral, but it offers nothing positive, leaving moral claims unamenable to rational appraisal. Anti-rationalism in either form denies the claims of rationalism, but it accepts the same fundamental presupposition that if morality is to be rationally justified, it must be in terms external to morality. An underlying concern on both sides of the debate is the phenomenon of moral disagreement, rationalists disturbed by it and wanting to show that there is a right answer to a moral question, and anti-rationalists taking it as evidence of the personal or subjective element in moral judgment and that moral issues cannot be resolved by reason. This is to neglect the evidence of sensible critical discussion, the development of moral understanding with age and time, the occasion of moral insight, people’s ability to reflect, to be persuaded, to be convinced, to reserve judgment and to change their minds; it may be that moral differences display an important feature of the nature of moral rationality rather than a failure of reason. Both sides have a point, in that it cannot be right that so fundamental and important a phenomenon in human life as morality is simply beyond rational criticism, yet it is equally problematic that attempts to bring order to the chaos of moral phenomena distort them and fail to satisfy. What I propose in the next chapter in bringing Murdoch into consideration is intended to provide a perspective on the nature and scope of rationality in morality – a way to understand what critical discussion on matters of value can achieve and what it cannot, that makes disagreement both intelligible and unthreatening.

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## 2.1. PRICHARD IS NOT A MORAL RATIONALIST

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Both strong and weak moral rationalism seek to provide an external justification for acting morally. Prichard read Plato as in effect trying to do the same thing in arguing, as he thought, that it makes the agent better off to act morally, and he thought Plato failed as he would have thought the other two had failed to show that acting morally can be given an external justification. He argued that no such external justification is either necessary or possible: moral obligation is underivative. The instrumental argument gives the wrong kind of reason, and eliminates morality altogether. Moral rationalism attempts to derive reasons

to be moral from a morally neutral conception of rationality. Superson tried, by aiming for a morally neutral definition of rationality, not to beg the question in favour of morality, but in my view did precisely that. Portmore begged the question in favour of rationality by redefining morality in terms acceptable to it, at the cost of giving an unrecognizable conception of the moral.

Both versions of MR in effect make distinctions amongst kinds of reason for acting. Prichard would have recognized a distinction between what today are represented as two kinds of reason. He talked of motives and he also talked of what makes an action right, both of which can be referred to as ‘reasons for acting’ – so arguably, he saw a distinction between motivating and justifying reasons.<sup>319</sup> A motivating reason gives an explanation as to why a person acted as they did, and is external to the nature of the act – a person can in principle have a plurality of motives for acting in a certain way, and many people who do the same thing, i.e. perform actions that fall under a certain description, could each have different motives for acting thus – e.g. for ‘walking along the street’. That is, an action description does not necessarily include within it any indication as to why a person might act in that way.<sup>320</sup> At least some of the time Prichard thought of motives as desires,<sup>321</sup> and since desires must be for something, he saw them as individuated by reference to their objects: ‘a desire of or for x’. A person’s motive in acting is a desire for some object and they act in order to realize or obtain that object. The objects of desires are many and various; personal good is one such object, variously realizable by the acquisition of wealth, health, happiness, that red dress, a qualification in chiropody, or any number of other things or states of affairs, and other objects he mentioned include the good of other people and acquiring knowledge.

The other kind of reason Prichard recognized is often now referred to as a justifying reason. However, the idea of a justifying reason is further ambiguous and Prichard did not make the distinction, or perhaps better, was aware of it and thought it otiose. In one sense, an action is justified if it is shown to be right. What is right, justified, in this sense, is the deed itself, which is to say, a kind of deed as it falls under a description – such as keeping a promise. In justifying keeping a promise, if one can do so, one explains what it is about keeping a promise that makes it right to do so – one may perhaps identify a feature of actions that fall under the description of keeping a promise that makes them right, such as their producing

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<sup>319</sup> As mentioned in chapter 1, footnote 38, the current literature tends to distinguish kinds of reason according to function, as explanatory, motivating, justifying, although they differ somewhat in their analyses. A single reason may have more than one function.

<sup>320</sup> It may, for all I know, be the case that some action descriptions indicate the, or part of the, motivation for doing them, but it is not necessarily so and often is not so.

<sup>321</sup> For example, Prichard, *Moral Writings*, 15: “Desire and the sense of obligation are co-ordinate forms or species of motive.”



happiness. Prichard of course thought that there was no feature of an action, other than the fact of its being the kind of action it is, in this case the keeping of a promise, that made it right: it is right to keep promises because of what it is to keep a promise, because of the intrinsic features of acts of this kind – the invitation to another to rely on one, failure to fulfil which will have consequences for them which in turn brings consequences for oneself including loss of trust – and not because of some other feature, some mark of rightness, that acts of this kind share over and above the fact of the promise-keeping.

The other sense in which a reason can justify an action is that in which the doing of an action is justified – that is to say, it is not the nature of the deed, here, whose justification is in question, but the doing of the deed. The assumption is that we know why it is right to keep promises but we may still ask if it is right for A to keep her promise to B at t. How does one justify the doing of a particular action, over and above justifying the action as being of a kind that is justified? What sort of consideration is relevant?

Perhaps it may be thought that reference, say, to certain details of the particular circumstances can justify someone's acting in a way that is already accepted to be justified in virtue of its nature. Prichard took it that the justifying reason for acting morally in the latter sense is the same as the justifying reason in the former: what makes it right to act is the same thing as what makes the action right. Is it possible for the two kinds of justification to come apart. Is it possible a) that it could be right for someone to do something on some occasion yet the (kind of) action they do not be right? Or b) that a certain (kind of) deed could be right yet it not be right for a person to do that act on some occasion?<sup>322</sup>

Regarding a): It seems *prima facie* reasonable to suppose that if it is judged right to do something it must also be that what is done is right – or we would have a case of its being right to do something wrong, which is paradoxical if not contradictory.

Regarding b): Conversely, it seems that if a certain deed is right it must also be right to do it, or we would have a case of a right action that it is wrong to do, again paradoxical; or perhaps a right action that is awaiting the right moment for instantiation, which seems a peculiar entity.

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<sup>322</sup> Or, right not to do a deed that is morally right, or wrong not to do a deed that is morally wrong: I take these as practically equivalent to the possibilities considered above – the point is whether there can be a discrepancy in judgment of 'rightness' between a deed and the doing of it.

The consequence of separating the two senses in which action is justified is to imply that it could be right to do a deed that is morally wrong, or that it could be wrong to do a deed that is morally right. This is what Superson accepted made sense but tried to show never actually happens, and what both Portmore and Dorsey claimed does happen – that what justifies the one may not justify the other. This amounts to the claim that an action could be ‘right’ in a sense which does not mean ‘morally right’. These are the two senses Prichard distinguished in criticizing Butler for holding that acting morally is externally justified by making us happy, discussed in the previous chapter. Prichard accepted that a thing could be right in the sense of being correct, rational, according to a norm, or suited to an end, but denied that this had anything to do with morality. ‘Hypothetical imperatives’ were in his view “not really imperatives”,<sup>323</sup> but empirical observations to the effect that those who desire certain ends are likely to take the means to them. An action already recognized as morally required could not in his view simply be omitted for reasons of that kind, but that is to say that when considering possible courses of action, if reasons of that kind come into consideration, they will either have insufficient force to override a moral obligation or they will themselves be competing moral claims<sup>324</sup> – as I argued in chapter 3, people’s interests including those of the agent can be moral considerations. Thus the overall evaluation is a moral evaluation, and the overall right action, rather than permitting the omission of moral considerations itself constitutes morality’s judgment upon all competing concerns and hence is morally right.

a) The sorts of examples (given by Portmore and Dorsey) of its being right to do what is morally wrong, or right not to do what is morally right, were, I argued, unconvincing. They involve its being ‘right’ in the sense of ‘in one’s interest’ rendered as ‘rational’, to which gloss one is not obliged to assent on pain of irrationality, immorality, improper English or other normative breach – it is just the gloss Prichard objected to in his interpretation of Butler, on the ground that it appeals to reasons outside morality. Indeed to my ear the non-moral ‘right’ is parasitic on the moral one in this use, and this is being traded on by those who argue for its authority over moral rightness: we assent, if we do, to the breach of the standardly moral consideration in favour of a purportedly non-moral one because we are misled to think the latter is ‘right’ and forget that here it does not mean ‘morally right’ but only correct relative to self-interest, whose overriding status in relation to the moral requirement (by which standard *ex hypothesi* it is supposed not right) has not been shown but merely asserted. I argued in chapter 3 that we have not seen convincing proof that self-interest ever overrides morality, although we have been told that sometimes it – rationally (self-interestedly) – does. I argued that this description misrepresented the phenomena, and

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<sup>323</sup> Prichard, *Moral Writings*, 54.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

that the interests of the agent are morally significant considerations to be taken into account in deliberation, and their relative importance a moral judgment.

b) Taking it the other way, on what occasion do we judge that something is right or wrong apart from the situation in which we judge it to be right, or wrong, to do it? Perhaps we can get some purchase on the idea that what justifies a deed may not justify its being done, if we separate the moral assessment of a (kind of) deed from the occasion of a performance of such a deed. Perhaps if we think of 'a right action' as, say, 'paying a debt', and we think of it in the abstract, i.e. we do not think of anyone's actual payment, but of the nature of payment of debts in general. So we think that paying a debt is right, but as yet we do not have in mind any actual debt. But then, if we are thinking that way, there is no actual action of which we may approve or disapprove – we only have one of the two items we identified. We do not yet have an example of the case we are considering: where a deed is right but it is not right to do it, because there is nobody considering doing it. So let's bring in A, who owes B £10. We know that it is right to pay debts, and *ex hypothesi*, A owes B. Now we ask, is it right for A to repay B? What consideration could make us answer in the negative?

It is right for A to give B at t the £10 she owes her if it is true i) that it is right to pay debts, and ii) that this constitutes the repayment of A's debt to B, and iii) that it is right for A to repay her debt to B. What makes it i) right to pay debts might be something like the fact that being in debt just is to be in temporary possession of what is rightfully someone else's money on the mutual understanding that it will be returned within some reasonable period of time. These are the sorts of intrinsic feature of an action that Prichard had in mind when talking of what makes an action right. What makes this proposed action ii) constitute the repayment of A's debt to B is its not being anything else, such as a random donation of £10 by A to B and its not being some irrelevant act by A but its being understood by both parties that this £10 note being pressed into B's hand by A is the return of the very sum that B had previously loaned to A. What makes it iii) right for A to repay her debt to B? Is there something further to be said here? We've already mentioned that it is right for A to repay her debt to B because i) it is right to pay debts, and ii) A's giving B this money instantiates debt-paying. Should we add that it can only do this by being the act of repaying the very debt that A owes B, and, if this is a further point, iii) that A acts thus because she happens to be in exactly the unique situation that both makes it possible for her to instantiate the repayment of her debt and requires that she do so?

That appears to reiterate Prichard's point that an action is made right by its intrinsic features, given that what is thereby made right is a particular action in a particular situation and not a

generic action; in deliberation people do not ask whether a kind of action is right, unrelated to actual circumstances, but whether what they propose to do now is the right thing, or whether what they did was the right thing.<sup>325</sup> Prichard did not countenance the additional question, given it is right to pay debts and A owed B, whether it was right of A to do what she did, namely, to hand over to B the sum that she did at the time that she did for the reason that she owed her the money. Prichard saw the answer to the second as the same as the answer to the first. The right-making features of an action, whatever they are, would also justify someone's doing it; doing something 'because it is right' is to have judged a certain action to be required in a situation because of the features of the situation and the action. Having recognized that a particular action bears certain features, including such features as its being the giving of money by A to B, the relation between A and B being that of owing and being owed, A's being in a position to pay, there being no impediment to payment lawful or other, and whatever other relevant features, just is, in Prichard's view, seeing it as a right action and hence right to do it; perhaps strictly all of that would be to recognize the non-moral features which suggest descriptions under which the action falls ('A and B passing the time of day', 'A giving B money', 'A repaying her debt to B'), the most apt of which presents it in its moral light and arrival at which depends on being aware of, attending to, those features of the situation that bear on that description: it is possible to be ignorant of or mistaken about such features and mistake the significance of the action. Thus, for Prichard, it could not be right in one way if it was not right in the other. We still need to find a consideration that could break the connection.

Why would anyone ask if it was right for A to repay B at *t*, if they knew that A owed B and it is about time she paid her? What more is there to know about the situation before a judgment can be made as to the status of A's action in giving B the money? Perhaps the question is about the timing – is the questioner's concern that, while it is accepted as a fact that A owes B and ought to repay her, now is not the moment? One could invent scenarios on which it would be unwise to repay a debt at some given time – perhaps one is suddenly desperately ill and cannot attend to the practicalities – but such a situation does not make it wrong to repay the debt, merely unwise or simply impossible to do it now. This is an external contingent matter that does not bear on the moral rightness of paying debts in general or on A's paying B, but only on the prudence, the convenience, the rationality (we could choose to say), of A's doing so at this moment.

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<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*, 77

One might convert the worry into a more obviously moral worry – that repaying the debt will enable the creditor to harm herself or others and she is likely to do that – Hume’s profligate debauchee<sup>326</sup> comes to mind. Then one simply has a case of moral conflict, between paying the debt and preventing a harm, and it is probably uncontentious that as thus described the prevention of harm has priority, but that the debt is not waived thereby but temporarily suspended awaiting a more suitable time for repayment. If A repays B regardless, and if doing that is wrong, it is not the repaying of a debt that is wrong but the knowing facilitation of harm by giving B the wherewithal to do it. What is needed is an example that would show that, while it is agreed that paying one’s debts is morally required, yet A, who owes B, is not morally required to pay her – not that her repaying her has become difficult, but that the fact of her debt is annulled by some other consideration such that she no longer morally ought to settle the debt, even that it would be morally wrong of her to do so. Perhaps the creditor has wronged A, provoking justified resentment, or committed a heinous crime that makes everyone feel she doesn’t deserve justice, that doing justice now would be wrong. Prichard recognized the possibility of cases where justice requires us to do something that does not produce good,<sup>327</sup> and this could be that sort of case. Plato would say that a person is always owed justice – but judgment must determine what that is to be; arguably a person’s wrongdoing, however vile, cannot justify treating them unjustly. If some do judge that repaying the debt is not now morally required, although I don’t know that everyone would agree, then a judgment internal to morality has been made about the duty or otherwise to meet one moral requirement in light of new moral factors, and this is different from saying that it has been overridden by non-moral reasons. I don’t think this example provides what we are looking for.

Perhaps a better example can be devised but I am doubtful. It will be answered that these examples fail because what is needed is one where the initial justification is moral and the overall justification is rational. Prichard did not think there were separate courts of adjudication; he thought one judged what one ought to do by a process of non-moral and moral thinking that would take into account relevant considerations and reach an appreciation of what ought to be done. Recognition of relevant considerations and their nature belonged to a process of “general thinking”.<sup>328</sup> What one comes to appreciate in reflecting on these just was, in Prichard’s view, their moral valence in present circumstances – that would be the “moral thinking”.<sup>329</sup> It is true that he thought self-interest opposed to duty and that he did not specify in general terms the nature of various sorts of consideration

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<sup>326</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Bk.III, Pt. 2, §1.

<sup>327</sup> Prichard, *Moral Writings*, 10.

<sup>328</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*

that might enter into deliberation, such as those of convenience, economy, law, politeness, taste, etc. Specified in this way, he probably would have regarded most of these as opposed to duty also,<sup>330</sup> and unable to override it, but this does not entail that he accepted the model of moral rationality assumed by moral rationalists. On their view these are all separate and incommensurable kinds of reason for action differentiated by content which thus present a problem for comparison and force rationalists to insist that morality always overrides other kinds of consideration which must then be ignored, and anti-rationalists to insist that other kinds of consideration cannot always be ignored with the consequence that morality must sometimes be pushed aside. More or less plausible examples are devised to support either view, as we have seen in previous chapters. Since Prichard saw the overall 'ought' as a moral 'ought' it is consistent with his view that evaluating what to do in a situation involves devising a strategy that as far as possible reconciles competing demands and where not possible faces the implications, and this just is a moral adjudication. What is thereby justified is a unique action, which it cannot then be wrong to perform because it is the performance of a particular action with particular features which is in view when considering the matter of justification.<sup>331</sup> He did not think that conflicting considerations involved separate sets of reasons such that one could first deem an action morally justified, or provisionally justified, and then have to bring the action before the court again for a second hearing according to further criteria not yet brought into consideration. He thought the matter of justifying actions involved correctly identifying an actual situation to make its features perspicuous to moral judgment under an apt description and that judgment would be an overall judgment and its nature would be essentially moral.

Essentially the rationalist project looks outside morality to justify doing actions already sanctioned by morality. Unlike Prichard, rationalists see overall justification to belong to the separate rational consideration of what to do. Strong moral rationalists claim that it just happens to be the case that separate rational criteria always endorse compliance with morality. Weak moral rationalists also claim this, but on a suitably weakened view of what morality requires, designed to exclude stringent moral demands. One could characterize the difference between them by saying that, whereas strong moral rationalists think that what is morally required is dictated by morality but, as it happens, endorsed by a non-moral rationality, weak rationalists think that what can be morally required waits upon the judgment of rationality. That is why the verdicts of weak moral rationalists upon what, all things considered, a person ought to do, often countenance a person's ignoring

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<sup>330</sup> He might have thought there could be genuine, and possibly irresolvable, conflicts between law and morality – it may be that some sorts of reason are different from other sorts in their ability to conflict with morality.

<sup>331</sup> Prichard, *Moral Writings*, 77.

acknowledged moral considerations for the sake of others they see as more important. When other factors are, as they see it, more important than moral ones, then according to their conception of rationality, the moral considerations are not requirements, because it would be irrational to require of someone what it was unreasonable for them to do. They thereby derive a more morally permissive set of all-things-considered right actions than that of strong moral rationalists.

Prichard disagreed with both strong and weak moral rationalists, since he did not regard a judgment as to what morality calls for to need to refer, still less to defer, to considerations outside morality in order to ascertain what a person ought to do: he did not think there were such considerations. Prichard thought that morality dictated what a person ought to do, and implicitly meant what they ought to do overall. If Prichard is right that overall judgments are moral judgments, that implies that what moral rationalists of either strength think it is rational to do – right, all things considered – are really moral judgments expressing their own somewhat different moral outlooks. They differ as to the relative importance of self-interest and moral considerations, but such judgments are moral judgments: their conception of rationality is not morally neutral but incorporates moral values. I shall explain this further in chapter 6. In assuming the overridingness of morality Prichard might appear to be in agreement with strong moral rationalism, but he is not, since their conception of the overridingness of morality is that of its supremacy, defined as its rational authority – its being endorsed by an external non-moral rationality in cases of conflict. Since Prichard regarded the resolution of conflicting factors as a matter internal to morality, he does not subscribe to the notion of supremacy and cannot be suitably described as a moral rationalist of this kind.

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## 2.2. PRICHARD IS NOT A MORAL ANTI-RATIONALIST

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On the other hand, anti-rationalism is less a positive thesis than merely the denial that moral requirements are rational requirements. Some think morality itself is thereby rendered suspect and hence that it has no authority, but since my interest in this dissertation is with the authority of morality I have not addressed these. Others may only deny that the source of morality's authority is that of reason. The views of these anti-rationalists appear to come in different strengths too. They may accept both rational and moral authority, and regard them as entirely separate normative domains, or they may deny that rationality has or always has priority over morality. The weaker version of this view is just the denial that it is always rational to act morally. This allows that acting morally can sometimes be externally

rationality endorsed and sometimes not, making it irrational on those occasions, often with the implication that then it is legitimate to act immorally. The stronger version says rationality lacks the resources to endorse acting morally, but those who claim this, who might include Hume and earlier Foot,<sup>332</sup> do not necessarily think that flouting morality is thereby made legitimate. They face a puzzlement about how to characterize the error of immorality, that is, how to justify morality, and about motivating those who claim to have no desire to act morally.

Paradoxically then, SAR can share with SMR a respect for the overriding authority of moral requirements, although they differ on its source; while WAR and WMR afford greater importance to other normative domains that can in their view override the dictates of morality. The difference between WMR and WAR appears to be largely terminological – they agree that morality provides reasons for acting which in the absence of conflict would constitute what we ought overall to do. They agree that in the presence of competing reasons, from the rational point of view, the morally determined action may be excessively demanding. But when faced with that situation, one allows that rationality recommends acting immorally, while the other holds that following rationality at the expense of morality involves violation of no moral requirements. Either way, the agent contravenes morality. The anti-rationalist will concede their action is morally wrong, while the rationalist will maintain that they breach no moral demand, but both claim that they act rationally and both hold that that is the most important thing.

Prichard thinks moral requirements, by which he means the requirements of ordinary morality, as he terms it, as opposed to those of some suitably adjusted moral theory, always overriding. He would not accept that they can be violated for the sake of other sorts of consideration. That, together with the fact that he, like Hume, thinks morality's demands cannot be defended by argument, may make him look like an anti-rationalist of the stronger persuasion. Yet I have suggested his denial that argument can show that we ought to act morally is not equivalent, and would not have been taken by him as equivalent, to the claim that a person is not justified in acting morally. He thought we reach an appreciation of moral duty by "general" and "moral thinking",<sup>333</sup> and these reveal such justification as befits moral action. Nor would he make concessions to those who might simply deny that they can see any reason to act morally, the Humean response being to admit the difficulty of convincing

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<sup>332</sup> Philippa Foot, "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives", *Philosophical Review*, Vol.81, 3, Jul 1972, 305-316.

<sup>333</sup> Prichard, *Moral Writings*, 12.



“the sensible knave”<sup>334</sup> by argument, his only resort being appeal to his better nature if he has one; Hare used the word ‘fanatic’ – that is, they gave up on them. Prichard did not populate his writings with such fictitious people because he did not seriously entertain the idea that real people would fail to see the sense of acting rightly (this is not the same as thinking everyone would act rightly). He was certainly aware they saw its inconvenience and other personal costs, but he also thought that careful thought would reveal that there was something they ought to do, whether they would actually think carefully, or would be prepared, willing, or happy to act accordingly, or not. On this view, failure to see reason to act morally is at least in part a moral failure, rather than either a purely cognitive failure or an inexplicable idiosyncratic response. For these reasons, Prichard’s view does not fit any of the views from strong moral rationalism at one extreme to strong anti-rationalism at the other. Yet rationalism and anti-rationalism are thought to cover the whole territory: either morality is rationally underpinned or it is not. So either I am mistaken about Prichard, or about rationalism and anti-rationalism, or there is a third way.

### 3. THE ALTERNATIVE VIEW

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In my view Prichard points in the direction of a third way. I think Prichard’s insights had implications which when brought out lead away from the debate in its present form, and closer to Plato’s way of answering the ‘Why be moral?’ question. Plato’s answer takes neither of the above forms, and though I have argued that Prichard misunderstood Plato, I have tried to show that his view bore closer resemblance to Plato’s than he thought, and than to the other two views. My claim is that a Platonic approach, of which we can see the seeds in Prichard’s view, could resolve or dissolve the disagreement between these two sides. The most important point of difference between rationalists and anti-rationalists on the rationality of morality is over whether a conception of rationality independent of morality can or cannot justify acting morally. Rationalists believe morality can be justified by an independently conceived rationality, and anti-rationalists believe it cannot. One way to break the impasse is to question the conception of rationality that both sides accept. In my view Prichard implicitly held a different conception of practical rationality, and on a more developed version of this view, it is possible to defend moral action as rational without appealing to a conception of rationality that is empty of value. This as I understand it would allow for a measure of disagreement over the extension of the terms moral (morally right) and rational (rationally justified), as people come up against the limits of critical language and mutual

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<sup>334</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, §9, Part 2.

intelligibility. A consequence of that is that there is no need either for a blanket denial of the rationality of acting morally or a blanket assertion that every action that someone thinks morally right must always be rationally justifiable to everyone else. On this view, such disagreement is essentially moral. I hope the next chapter will clarify these remarks.

It might be thought anachronistic to say Plato thought that duty overrides interest, because duty is not a characteristically Greek concept, at least the uses of the word we translate ‘justice’ do not coincide with all our uses of that word. But I think the texts<sup>335</sup> support the interpretation that his notion of justice covers more than ours and in certain contexts extends to our idea of right action.<sup>336</sup> I think they support the interpretation of justice both as a fine personal quality and as a feature of actions. So it can fairly be said that Plato saw doing the right thing as always best for a person, and omitting to do it, or doing wrong, always worse than the alternatives, as I have tried to explain in chapter 4. So it seems to be no misrepresentation to say that Plato thought that duty overrides interest. In this he and Prichard are in agreement. But this much is also claimed by moral rationalists. Rationalists understandably want to show morality justified, by way of strengthening it against undermining forms of doubt and scepticism, because of the importance of morality in their eyes, and have tried to do so by seeking an external justification. Anti-rationalists may recognize the importance of morality, but they also recognize the weaknesses of rationalists’ attempts to reinforce it against doubt. They sense that, while it is unproblematic to allow the overridingness of actions on whose moral valence there is broad consensus, it is futile to insist that rationality endorses acting in ways over which there is strong disagreement, ways that some people fervently condemn and others as fervently commend, like reinstating the death penalty, or repaying a wrong in kind, or whether somebody ought to attend their estranged grandmother’s funeral – a strong point against rationalism is the fact of moral disagreement. Anti-rationalists may be more or less concerned about the importance of morality, but one could say they are less impressed by the authority of rationality, which is undermined by cases of strong disagreement in which reason, as they conceive it, cannot adjudicate.

Plato does not argue, as Prichard thought, that acting morally guarantees the enhancement of a person’s quality of life, which is to say that he does not offer this kind of external

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<sup>335</sup> I have referred mostly to the *Republic* but justice is of course a concern in many other dialogues of Plato, and this interpretation is I think consistent across them.

<sup>336</sup> See, e.g., Lesley Brown, “Glaucon’s Challenge, Rational Egoism and Ordinary Morality”, (2007) [http://www.philosophy.ox.ac.uk/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0008/1115/Glaucon.pdf](http://www.philosophy.ox.ac.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0008/1115/Glaucon.pdf) (accessed 10/08/2014) 44-6.

justification for acting morally. He does not claim, as for example Gauthier<sup>337</sup> does, that acting morally is likely to result in a person's overall advantage and is therefore a rational choice. Arguably the view Plato puts into the words of Glaucon<sup>338</sup> resembles that of Gauthier, and Socrates rejects it. Nor does Plato claim that any other considerations of a non-moral nature, such as the requirement of consistency suggested by Superson<sup>339</sup> (who suggested consistency also involves impartiality, but that is not outside morality), can decide whether it makes sense to act morally. So if Plato is a moral rationalist, his form of rationalism does not match the current versions. Plato would have agreed with Prichard that the only reason to act rightly is because it is right. But he also held that it is always better, absolutely, to do right than wrong and that goes beyond Prichard, even though Prichard, as I suggested above, could not but have agreed. Prichard recognized that doing right could be costly, but Socrates never denied that when it was pointed out in the dialogues. Whenever the costs of morality were mentioned, Socrates met the observation not by contradicting it, but by pressing on in spite of it, affirming that right action benefits the agent and wrongdoing harms them and that it is always better to do the right thing. If Prichard had wanted to deny that, he would have had to claim that it is not always better to do what is right, which amounts to admitting not that the costs can outweigh the benefits, with which he might have agreed, but that the costs can render the right thing not worth doing, and I do not think Prichard would have countenanced that claim. Yet he did not follow through the implications of insisting on the importance of duty for duty's sake, as Plato did, to explicate in what sense it is better to do right, given that it can be worse in the obvious ways.

The reason why Plato thought it better to do right was because it is constitutively good, whereas all other goods that might accrue to a person in life are extrinsic and contingent. Doing right, living a decent life, does not guarantee that one will gain in these other ways, nor doing wrong that one will not. Nobody seriously denies that doing the right thing can cost a person in terms of the sorts of non-constitutive good already mentioned and Plato did not. Prichard clearly did not. Prichard did not attempt to articulate the nature of the kind of good that Plato had in mind, and perhaps did not have any conception of it. He undoubtedly saw the good of a clear conscience – Cephalus mentioned that benefit but Socrates thought it not of the right kind.<sup>340</sup> So Plato is not a moral rationalist in the current sense because he does not accept any external rational endorsement of moral demands, whose importance he nevertheless claims is paramount. Nor can he be described as an anti-rationalist, precisely because he offered, whether successfully or not, what must qualify as a rational defence of

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<sup>337</sup> David Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1986).

<sup>338</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 358e-359c.

<sup>339</sup> Anita Superson, *The Moral Skeptic* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009), 92.

<sup>340</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, 330e.

the overriding nature of morality and the value of pursuing it – although of a different kind from the contemporary approach. So neither Plato nor Prichard fits the descriptions that we have been considering.

Plato sees a perfect and necessary coincidence of rational and moral requirements but that is, as I understand it, because, unlike the others, he sees them as internally related in this way: rather than moral action having to answer to separate rational considerations before it can be deemed rational, what it is overall right to do can only be so judged in light of moral and perhaps other considerations of value. The question of what it is right, all things considered, to do, is a question that cannot be answered without taking morality into account, but not merely as one competing factor amongst others, such that it could succeed or fail to predominate, but as itself providing the only possible way to make a judgment at all: providing, on his metaphor, the light by which to see truly and judge accordingly.<sup>341</sup> What it is rational to do, what it is right, all things considered, to do, depends on what morality allows, rather than the other way around – there can be no all-things-considered action that is not acceptable to morality. It is only morality, or perhaps value more widely construed, that can judge of the relative importance of considerations, such that without it, no judgment could be made at all. That is my understanding of Plato's view that a just person needs to have knowledge of the good.

If that is right, act consequentialism, to take Portmore's example of a problematic moral theory, is deemed unreasonably demanding not by a value-free rational judgment but by a moral judgment on his part about what can count as rational – it is a judgment about what it is reasonable for people to do. If my arguments are correct, that judgment can only be made in light of some understanding of what human beings are like, and there is no view of what human beings are like apart from the evaluative categories we have in terms of which to make such judgment. That will be explained further in the next chapter. Portmore rightly takes it as uncontroversially absurd to suppose that a person could be required, for a one utile increment in total utility, to kill their estranged uncle to get his heart for a transplant (his example<sup>342</sup>), having by some improbable vicissitude come to be able so much as to entertain this action as amongst their options. Portmore says Anita's moral reason for refraining from the murder outweighs her self-interested reason to commit it and renders

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<sup>341</sup> Clearly I am referring to the metaphor or simile of the sun in Plato's *Republic*, from 507b.

<sup>342</sup> Portmore shows act consequentialism unreasonably demanding on the ground that it requires not only unreasonable self-sacrifice but also unreasonably self-benefitting acts: Anita is by that theory *required* to kill her uncle for his heart which she needs for a transplant, because doing so would produce an absolute increase in total utility compared with acting for the "moral reason" she has to refrain from the murder (Portmore does not specify what moral reason she has to refrain from the murder). From *Commonsense Consequentialism*, 29.

conforming to the utilitarian requirement to be irrational overall, and that is his reason for rejecting the theory.<sup>343</sup> We can certainly reject the theory, but not because its verdicts are contrary to rationality. Rather, we simply but reasonably assert that no such thing could ever be required of someone by anything we could call morality, because morality is not flippant, and does not trade in immoralities, and because to have a conversation about morality requires mutual recognition of these fundamental facts instead of proceeding as if they were not true or can or ought to be ignored pending their proof by means of rational argument. We can confidently assert that any such course of action ought not so much as to come up for consideration, and we can do that on moral grounds. These are moral judgments but assumed assent to these and related presuppositions is that without which there can be no conversation about morality; or, genuine disagreement over which (which thankfully I personally have never encountered) limits the possibilities of such conversation because it would manifest limits of mutual understanding. One could say that reason and logic are internal to that.

Consequentialism so conceived presents nothing recognizable as human life, but rather, a picture of what it would be like if, *per impossibile*, reason untempered by value were applied to the consequentialist injunction to maximize utility. Anyone's taking its conclusions seriously would be thought humanly deficient, at the very least. To develop any understanding of what it is to be human involves developing values, something Plato argued was not an overnight matter, and it cannot be acquired by reading a textbook, although the deliverances of consequentialism do not even resemble the folly of youth – they are distortions, indeed corruptions. If we were not morally anchored we would not be able to judge them absurd, because, in so far as we can ascribe any meaning to the idea of logic, reason, rationality, untempered by value, there is no clearly demonstrable flaw in the consequentialist reasoning. The flaw is in allowing ourselves to be tempted, if anyone is, so far as to entertain the idea that there are such units of moral value as utility increments and that these could be the locus of importance such that their increase or decrease could determine whether someone ought to do some wicked thing. That is not a flaw in reasoning, but in evaluation, hence, the judgment of absurdity is only available to those with certain values, including moral values, though not perhaps exclusively moral values,<sup>344</sup> and as far as

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<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>344</sup> I leave open the possibility here that other kinds of value may be involved in judgments of rationality, for example, aesthetic or religious value. Also I leave open the possibility that kinds of value are not clearly demarcated – e.g. some matters of etiquette may be serious enough to be moral; some matters of morality may be as much matters of taste. I don't know how best to describe such cases; maybe to say that they involve elements of moral, aesthetic and other values in a single judgment, that we can say what is involved in paradigm cases of moral, aesthetic and other kinds of

I am aware there is no-one who is not in that group.<sup>345</sup> Portmore is, but he misdiagnoses the problem with consequentialism and hopes to rescue it. That is why Anscombe pronounced upon consequentialism as she did<sup>346</sup> and consequentialists who disagree with that assessment are, like her, expressing a particular moral outlook, not making a value-free rational judgment with which competent thinkers ought to agree.

That things matter to us in the various ways that they do is not independent of rationality but itself determines what we can regard as rational – hence what is rational is internal to morality. Portmore argues that we can only be morally required to do what it is rational to do. But he is not doing that, as he thinks, in a value-free zone.<sup>347</sup> He is saying that if he judges some action (rationally) absurd, it cannot make sense for morality to ask it of someone, but he never makes clear how we judge something absurd independently of an understanding of what it is to be human. My claim is that that understanding is essentially moral. There is no obvious point at which morality becomes too demanding – what morality can demand of us is a moral question. If human beings were more like machines with replaceable parts, the idea of salvaging the parts from one machine for the repair of another would have a different meaning for us; if we were so easily replaceable, the destruction of any of us could not matter as it does – a prohibition against it would not have the significance of the prohibition, and the inhibition, against killing that exists as we in fact are. People differ on what morality requires, and what it is rational to do, depending on their values. Their judgments are not immune to criticism, but nor are they made neutrally according to an established, universally agreed, verifiable, value-free conception of rationality capable of generating all correct moral judgments, disagreement with which is an indication of cognitive error.

Judgment of what is morally right and what is rational are different questions, but connected in such a way that we cannot have any notion of the reasonable without some notion of the valuable and we cannot assess what morality requires without some notion of the reasonable. If rationality were value-free, it would not provide the resources to enable us to judge that it does not require compliance with some daft deliverance of consequentialism; equally, unless

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judgment and that actual situations combine the phenomena and require discrimination in all these categories.

<sup>345</sup> By which I mean that supporters of consequentialism always reject the egregiously morally wrong, and add riders to the theory to accommodate the moral judgment.

<sup>346</sup> G. E. M. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy”, *Philosophy*, Vol.33, 124 (Jan 1958), 1-19: “if someone really thinks, *in advance*, that it is open to question whether such an action as procuring the judicial execution of the innocent should be quite excluded from consideration – I do not want to argue with him; he shows a corrupt mind.”

<sup>347</sup> Borrowing this idea from Gaita’s expression, “tone-free zone”, e.g. Rai Gaita, *After Romulus*, (Melbourne, Text Publishing, 2011), p.97 and elsewhere.

we had some notion of the reasonable we would lack the wherewithal to judge that morality sometimes requires effort or sacrifice – we would not know what a sacrifice was. The adage ‘Ought implies can’ expresses the idea that morality cannot ask of us what we cannot do; but what we can and cannot physically, psychologically, humanly, morally, do is a judgment about what it is reasonable to do. Hence, morality and rationality are interdependent notions. They are different concepts, and there is no guarantee of perfect co-incidence, except perhaps in the ideal situation as conceived by Plato, but connected in that both depend on values. It might be worrying if people could not be expected to agree that it is in general or in the abstract rational to do the morally right thing – that would be disagreement about the grammar of the two terms rather than about the content of judgments using them. But that falls short of stipulating that there could never be a good reason to doubt or deny even that.

Similar considerations apply to Superson’s arguments too. She tried to avoid importing morality into her conception of rationality, with the result that she could not complete her project of rationally justifying morality. She defined humanity as rational agency, and claimed that the concept of rational agency entails acting impartially. I would suggest it is not uncontentious that the defining characteristic, if there is one, of humanity is appropriately identified as rational agency, and not obvious that rational agency necessarily involves impartiality. What it is to be human, what it is to be rational, I have suggested, cannot be understood without importing value into the description. Further, as I argued in chapter 2, impartiality is a moral concept, even though formal rather than having content, requiring moral discrimination in deliberation in order to judge who counts, why and in what way. I would also claim that Superson’s making these judgments, her preference of a Kantian conception of equality<sup>348</sup> over a utilitarian one, of a Kantian moral theory over others, particularly contractarianism, and her gloss on its meaning, is itself an expression of her moral point of view and not a neutral choice made on non-moral grounds.

In the next chapter I hope to enlarge somewhat on these points by reference to the work of Iris Murdoch whose views on moral thinking are in the spirit of Plato’s and which in my view offer a more perspicuous description of the phenomena of rationality, moral development, moral understanding and reasoning than that of those writers I have criticized. I think it retains Prichard’s insight but develops the implications in an illuminating way.

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<sup>348</sup> Superson, *The Moral Skeptic*, 99.

## CHAPTER 6 – AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW OF MORAL RATIONALITY

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### SUMMARY

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A modern proponent of something like a Platonic understanding of the nature of moral rationality, of critical thinking more broadly, is Iris Murdoch. My modest claim is that while Prichard did not pursue his thoughts on the nature of moral rationality, his limited remarks are hospitable to development in the direction taken by Murdoch, and that her way of representing moral thinking is truer to the phenomena than the model I have criticized in earlier chapters. In this chapter I give a brief exposition of Murdoch's thoughts on the theme, which necessarily cannot do justice either to her or to the topic, and which can aim only to present a number of important features of an alternative conception of moral rationality. I argued earlier that moral action cannot be given external rational endorsement as moral rationalists attempt to do, but that the failure of moral rationalism does not entail the anti-rationalist view that moral action cannot be rationally supported at all, because both sides accept a mistaken conception of the nature of reasons for action and of evaluative thinking. On the view presented here, such rational justification as is appropriate for acting morally just is the result of evaluation of relevant considerations according to the varied array of critical resources at our disposal. These of their nature shape reality according to value, and can be made use of within such constraints as exist upon meaningful discourse to express a moral consciousness.

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## 1. PRICHARD'S POSITIVE POINT, AND AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO MORAL RATIONALITY

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Prichard thought the matter of justifying action concerned individual actions under consideration in actual situations, and the work of justifying them involved correctly identifying and describing them to make their moral features perspicuous. He did not take that thought much further, but he did think that properly described moral actions were likely to wear their justification on their sleeve, by displaying the significant moral features that rendered them right. An action described as 'meeting X in London' is not thereby shown right, but if it is described as 'keeping one's promise to X' its moral nature is made explicit.<sup>349</sup> Yet he denied that an action could be demonstrated by argument to be either morally right or right, all things considered, which he took to be the same thing. Rather, by means of "general" and "moral thinking",<sup>350</sup> by attending to the particular features of an action in a situation, we come to appreciate its moral nature. Unlike those engaged in the contemporary debate, he did not conceive of reasons for action as belonging to separate and incommensurable domains of authority. As Hurka put it, he thought there are no 'oughts' other than the moral 'ought'.<sup>351</sup> For this reason he thought that moral justification is all the justification either necessary or possible, and implicitly that acting morally must therefore be rational. That is, even while insisting that no argument could demonstrate the rightness of a deed or of doing it, he did not take that to imply that a person was not justified in doing a deed which is not, in that very particular sense, rationally justified. He assumed a morally justified deed also rationally justified, not in the sense of being demonstrably right according to some set of reasons other than the moral reasons, but in the sense that a thoughtful consideration of all relevant factors would reveal their importance and yield all-things-considered justification, in which case to behave in a morally justified way would be a paradigm of rational behaviour. This is not an unintelligible claim.

The opposite claim that behaving morally is irrational would I think be the more counterintuitive, and contentious (even where it might be accepted that some particular moral actions can be irrational). Whether any human action can be demonstrated to be 'the right action, all things considered' such that the reasons adduced for doing it compel assent

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<sup>349</sup> Prichard's example, from H. A. Prichard, *Moral Writings*, ed. Jim MacAdam (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2002), 30.

<sup>350</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>351</sup> Thomas Hurka, "Underivative Duty: Prichard on Moral Obligation", *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 27 No. 2 (Jul 2010), 119.

to its being rational to do it with the further implication that someone who does not assent to its being rational is not thinking correctly, not making sense, in some demonstrable, universally agreed way, is not obvious. That all human intentional action must be subject to demonstration in this way is a very strong claim, but something like this must be assumed by moral rationalists, who want it to be true for the subset of intentional actions which are moral actions (if that is a subset), and I think requires support. If my interpretation of Plato is right, what is rational, i.e. correct by the standards of rationality, is itself a value judgment. There is not obviously just one rationally right means to one's ends, even. We make an evaluation and judge what's best. Often it will be instantly obvious and command consensus – it will not so much as be questioned; as often, there will be disagreement – a person may be pressed to make a case for going about things in the way that they have. They may successfully convince, or not. They may change their mind, or not. We may deduce from this that there is a conception of practical rationality, which I think is in keeping with Plato's and with Prichard's expressed views,<sup>352</sup> that does not represent reasons as belonging to separate incommensurable domains, one of which is moral, in a pecking order of supremacy that can itself be shown correct by any set of normative criteria to which we all do and should subscribe, at the top of which is that of rational reasons.

Failure of rational demonstration according to recognized criteria threatens chaos. Intuitionism claims, unsatisfactorily, that we know but we don't know how we know. Prichard in fact offered the undeveloped idea that we attend to the particularities of a situation, think about it and then arrive at a morally perspicuous description. That is not chaos, and it does not invoke strange metaphysical entities that other people cannot see. It offers intimations of a middle way, between rigid orthodoxy and the formless abyss. His claim seems to be the modest one that what we say, however well supported by additional information and explanation, must in the end just be grasped, and this incidentally, is not peculiar to moral utterances. Explanation comes to an end and what is said must be understood, or not. A description – e.g. that in meeting X in London Y would keep his promise – must be seen to be apt, or not.

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### 1.1. HOW DO WE ARRIVE AT OUR DESCRIPTION OF AN ACTION IN THINKING ABOUT WHAT TO DO?

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It may seem a leap from Prichard to Iris Murdoch. I want to make a tentative point about Prichard's thinking about morality and moral philosophy, by suggesting that his view is

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<sup>352</sup> My claim is not that they explicitly held this view, but that it is implicit in their way of saying why we ought to be moral.

open to possibilities that later writers such as Murdoch addressed seriously, although I do not claim he thought what they thought, only that, had he pursued some of his undeveloped thoughts about moral thinking he could have gone in this direction. In particular his idea of the morally perspicuous description, as opposed to the argument to the moral conclusion, sits comfortably within Murdoch's more elaborated description of moral thinking. My reference to "such writers as Murdoch" might raise an eyebrow, for she is unique and considered something of a philosophical outlier; for present purposes I simply take her as representative of a different way of thinking about moral thinking and am going to say that people "like Murdoch" in this respect include Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond and Rai Gaita<sup>353</sup> amongst many others. I mean no more than that these writers share a more ample notion of the nature of moral rationality, which in my view comes from having paid closer attention to the details of the way we think than has been done by the moral philosophers I have been discussing. It is not appropriate at this juncture, and I do not claim to be able, to explore that in detail, but my aim here is to sketch a different conception of rationality in general, and the nature of legitimate moral thinking in particular, to show its contrast with that assumed by those who argue for or against the rationality of morality in the ways I have addressed in previous chapters. I find it more illuminating, and that is the point of philosophy.

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## 2. IRIS MURDOCH IN "VISION AND CHOICE"

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In "Vision and Choice in Morality",<sup>354</sup> Murdoch takes issue with philosophers whose views about morality and moral philosophy she labels for convenience "the current view". She sees the view's more "remote ancestors" as Hume, Kant and Mill, and more immediately, the British empiricists and Russell and Ryle. Here as elsewhere she also addresses Hare. She explicitly states that the current view as she presents it may not be held by any individual but is a summary of a trend in thought.<sup>355</sup> Although she primarily had in mind "linguistic philosophers", and although philosophy's preoccupations have transmuted over the decades since then, I think the 'deliberation and action' model of moral thinking she criticizes is familiar and remains operative in broadly similar form in contemporary moral philosophy, in the 'reasons for action' discourse and is apparent, for example, in the notion of the 'all

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<sup>353</sup> See for example: Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1979); Cora Diamond, "We Are Perpetually Moralists" in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, eds M. Antonaccio and W. Schweiker (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996); Rai Gaita, *Good and Evil: an absolute conception*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford, Routledge, 2004).

<sup>354</sup> R. W. Hepburn and Iris Murdoch, "Symposium: Vision and Choice in Morality", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, Vol.30, Dreams and Self-Knowledge (1956), 14-58.

<sup>355</sup> Murdoch, "Vision and Choice", 34.

things considered right action’ – the choice of an action rationally made upon consideration of an array of discrete kinds of reason. I think her criticisms remain pertinent.

In brief outline, in that paper she identifies several features of the current view: it represents the moral life as consisting of a series of discrete episodes of deliberation and action; it sees moral judgment as supported by reasons valid for all who are similarly placed; it regards “specialized moral concepts”<sup>356</sup> as separable into a factual, descriptive component, for which there are criteria of application, and an evaluative, recommendatory component which reflects the agent’s freedom to choose; and it regards the moral agent as rational and responsible, freely choosing actions for transparent, universalizable reasons in a landscape of uncontentious material facts.

Her criticisms, in summary, are that the view does not fit the phenomena of morality; that it ignores or simplifies the inner life; that it itself is an expression of a particular moral outlook rather than, as it purports to be, a neutral appraisal of other moral outlooks; that it holds moral differences to be differences of value placed on neutrally ascertainable facts and producing different “choices”, when in her view they are often conceptual differences – differences of “vision”,<sup>357</sup> that it regards the fact of moral differences as a sign of confusion when it is a feature of the perspectival nature of morality; that it mislocates moral value as a subject matter alongside others, observable disinterestedly from outside, when in reality it is all-pervasive, an expression of a particular mode of responsiveness to the world. I shall now explain that in more detail.

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## 2.1. MISREPRESENTING THE PHENOMENA, AND ATTENTION TO THE INNER LIFE

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Murdoch makes two main points about the current view. First, that it arises from a “narrow and partial selection of phenomena”<sup>358</sup> rather than attending to the full details of the moral life and hence it misses much of importance, producing a model of moral life that is not true to reality – she suggests a more realistic alternative. This echoes what Prichard said, as discussed in chapter 1, that consequentialist and instrumental attempts to justify morality distort the phenomena, although he did not go on to attend to the phenomena in the detail, and with the perspicacity, that Murdoch does. Secondly, that the view itself embodies a

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<sup>356</sup> Those concepts which are now, after Williams, often referred to as “thick” concepts; the idea is not meant as a technical term, but as a convenient way to refer to relatively contentful items of vocabulary, such as ‘loyal’, ‘honest’, etc., as opposed to ‘good’, ‘right’, ‘should’ and ‘ought’.

<sup>357</sup> Murdoch, “Vision and Choice”, *passim*, but see p.38.

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

certain moral outlook that she characterizes as Liberal and protestant,<sup>359</sup> thus constituting one possible moral outlook amongst others, although it sees itself as “immune from partiality”<sup>360</sup> and aspiring to “the pure neutrality of logic”,<sup>361</sup> capable of assessing the phenomena of morality without commitment. She does not argue with being Liberal or protestant, but with representing the moral landscape as though this way of seeing it is the result of acts of cognition themselves uncoloured by value.

The view presents “the moral life of the individual as a series of overt choices which take place in a series of specifiable situations.”<sup>362</sup> These choices are the results of deliberations about reasons the agent considers to be “valid for all others placed as he, and which would involve the objective specification of the situation in terms of facts available to disinterested scrutiny.”<sup>363</sup> What is wrong with this in her view is that it excludes the inner life as irrelevant to morality, and to philosophizing about morality. It represents the language in which the morally significant is talked about as containing separable descriptive and evaluative elements, the former of which can be ascertained by all rational persons by the application of “definite external criteria”,<sup>364</sup> and the latter of which are inaccessible to others and resistant to critical investigation, arising from a picture which “is simple, behaviouristic, anti-metaphysical, and leaves no place for commerce with ‘the transcendent’.”<sup>365</sup> Moral differences are thus represented as differences of choice arising from an idiosyncratic valuation placed on the neutral, verifiable, uncontentiously describable situation and not, as she sees them, as the expressions of essentially personal responses to the world seen from the perspective of a socially and culturally situated individual. Behaviourism may now have receded, the excessive simplicity of the abstraction has been recognized, but in its essentials the reduced picture of the choosing subject remains.

She asks, “What place should be given to the ‘inner life’”<sup>366</sup> in a philosophical analysis of morality? For an answer she looks to literature, which in contrast with philosophy embraces the depth and variety of human experience. Noting, in response to R. W. Hepburn’s contribution to the symposium,<sup>367</sup> that “fable” is a form in which our understanding of life is expressed and explored, she asks, “is not fable-making a fairly natural and ordinary activity

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<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>365</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>367</sup> See footnote 354.

of human beings and is it not continuous with our most everyday methods of reflecting on and understanding our lives?”<sup>368</sup> She sees reflecting on and understanding our lives as the business of moral philosophy. This view of the business of moral philosophy is markedly different from that implied or explicit in the debate discussed in my previous chapters, for example as that of devising moral theory, or giving an answer to the questions, ‘How should we live?’ or ‘What are our duties?’<sup>369</sup> Stories are one form by means of which we can reflect on what it is to be human, and they depict our humanity more amply than is done by the spare picture painted by the philosophers. In the philosophical picture, “it has been readily assumed that in assembling the data (initial definition) for the moral philosopher to work on, we can safely leave aside not only the inner monologue and its like, but also overt manifestations of personal attitudes, speculations, or visions of life such as might find expression in talk not immediately directed to the solution of specific moral problems.”<sup>370</sup> Too close attention to deliberation and action has resulted in neglect of other moral phenomena. Elsewhere, she emphasizes the “work of attention”, an inner activity of thought attending to the world, as a feature of moral life, and says, “if we consider what the work of attention is like, how continuously it goes on, and how imperceptibly it builds up structures of value about us, we shall not be surprised that at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over.”<sup>371</sup> This extends Prichard’s idea of our attending to the situation before us in seeking the morally perspicuous description, to include the idea that understanding takes place in a milieu, brews over time and a response in the present is shaped by, reaches into, the more and less immediate past. The data of moral philosophy are not just rational deliberations about facts that issue in actions, but a much wider array of features of what she variously refers to as people’s moral outlook, moral consciousness and moral being.

Literature is an exploration of such data and is one way in which we develop and explore our understanding of the human predicament. Moral philosophy can do this too, and can learn from literature’s portrayal of human issues about the nature and depth of the phenomena to be attended to, and enable us to recognize that moral differences are not differences of “choice” but of “vision”, emanating from the perspective of a particular person, with a

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<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>369</sup> Reflecting on and understanding our lives in a philosophical way is not the same as anthropology, which observes and interprets human activity, but there isn’t room here to expand on that.

<sup>370</sup> Murdoch, “Vision and Choice”, 38.

<sup>371</sup> Iris Murdoch, “The Idea of Perfection”, in *The Sovereignty of Good* (London, ARK Paperbacks, 1985), 37. Behind this thought there is the Wittgensteinian idea that what we think is manifest in action, and not a separate activity completed before action takes place, that supposedly could exist without action occurring: that what we can be said to think can only be intelligible in terms of what we do.

history, a context, a sensibility, a response.<sup>372</sup> She calls these differences “conceptual”.<sup>373</sup> She means that the very language we use to express our thoughts itself formulates our response to reality into a definite shape: as a piece of clay can be formed into different shapes, but never into no shape at all, so what is said about the world in words gives it form by representing it as being one way rather than another way. Different language presents a different conception of reality – as she puts it, “if the concept is withdrawn we are not left with the same situation or the same facts.”<sup>374</sup> The image of the clay could be unhelpful, distracting into issues of what it is that is represented and what does the representing, multiplying entities irrelevantly. I am attempting to convey the idea that it is not possible to separate the form from the content of things we say, to take away the value and leave the unformed facts, because the shaping nature of concepts is their essence rather than a detachable component of them. Hence Murdoch says, “if moral concepts are regarded as deep moral configurations of the world, rather than as lines drawn round separable factual areas, then there will be no facts ‘behind them’ for them to be erroneously defined in terms of.”<sup>375</sup> The consideration of literature may help to show that morality is everywhere in life, and not a department of it, especially not confined to a series of discrete action events and the deliberations that precede them, interspersed amongst value-neutral episodes. It may help to see ourselves as continually responding as life unfolds, as uniquely yet historically, socially and culturally placed individuals. Hence, “If we take the view that moral differences are in this sense ‘conceptual’ and not exclusively behaviouristic we shall also be able to see moral philosophy itself as a more systematic and reflective extension of what ordinary moral agents are continually doing, and as able in its turn to influence morality.”<sup>376</sup> We are ordinarily engaged in thinking, questioning, trying to make sense, and philosophy is an extension of that.

She is careful to distinguish two ways in which the inner might be understood. The unshareable inner contents of introspection, of which philosophers often talk, and which present difficulties of identification, are not of interest here. Rather, she means to refer to something fairly ordinary and familiar, the “personal vision which may find expression overtly or inwardly” (inward expression might be “mental images, speeches uttered to

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<sup>372</sup> This is not meant as an exhaustive list of the components of an individual, but a gesture towards conveying the idea of the particularities of ‘what a person is like’, as Murdoch puts it. Cora Diamond talks of literature making us aware of different “modes of awareness” in her article on Murdoch’s paper, on p.103 of the book referenced in footnote 353.

<sup>373</sup> Murdoch, “Vision and Choice”, 42.

<sup>374</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>375</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

oneself, and perhaps more obscure occurrences which ask for metaphorical descriptions”<sup>377</sup>). These need not pose any problem in the philosophy of mind because they are “in principle exposable” but to moral philosophy they are important because they “constitute an important part of what, in the ordinary sense, a person ‘is like’.”<sup>378</sup> We are not just interested, morally, in people’s solutions to practical problems but also in “something more elusive which may be called their total vision of life”.<sup>379</sup> These phenomena and activities of mind “are themselves direct expressions of a person’s ‘moral nature’ or ‘moral being’ and demand a type of description which is not limited to the choice and argument model.”<sup>380</sup>

Attention to these phenomena gives us a different understanding of moral differences – we will be less tempted to think they are disagreements of valuation placed upon otherwise statable facts and hence less prone to think that where such disagreement occurs someone must be wrong. Not only may people be looking from different places; but there is no reason to suppose that if one took up the position of the other, they would necessarily see the same things – for it is not just a matter of what can be seen from there, but who is doing the seeing – a person brings something to the transaction, and different people bring different particularities. If we see moral differences as differences of vision in the way suggested, “a moral concept seems less like a movable and extensible ring laid down to cover a certain area of fact, and more like a total difference of *Gestalt*.”<sup>381</sup> In that case, while we all draw on the same linguistic resources for expression, unique moral perspectives show in our creative use of those resources, “and it is surely true that we cannot always understand other people’s moral concepts.”<sup>382</sup>

In her discussion of the value of “fable” to extending our moral understanding, Murdoch rejects the “universality model”<sup>383</sup> that is part of the current view. Fables are often about unique individuals – in the sense that the character is meant to be someone, with many detailed particularities drawn in, not a representative of humanity. We may draw a moral, or gain moral insight, for ourselves from them – but our doing so will be a personal matter, not a matter of eliciting rules for living applicable to anyone so placed. Thinking about stories, literature, may help us to see an individual’s responsiveness to their milieu as giving colour, shape and texture in order for it to be a response at all, rather than seeing people as translucent film onto which facts are imprinted, the same for all. One might come to think,

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<sup>377</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>380</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>382</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>383</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.



for example, that certain things may be possible for this character that are not possible for oneself, or that what one had thought possible is not so after all, and a story may show a host of very particular factors that make these things so. Cora Diamond illustrates her commentary on this paper by Murdoch by reference to an account of his life by Aleksandr Wat.<sup>384</sup> In particular, he talks of his relationship with the French poet, Paul Eluard – how Eluard’s succumbing to the pressures of communism led to his self-betrayal, and how difficult this made it for their friendship to continue on the old footing if at all. The reader may not be in the situation of the character, and may never be so. Clearly, that does not entail that the account is irrelevant to her so she has no need to read it. In so far as the character acts for reasons, we may be brought to understand their reasons, yet they may not be ones anyone else could or should adopt; it may not be possible, necessary or desirable for anyone else to follow the same path. Recognizing even this can be part of the moral import of the story for a reader. In reflecting in this way, we may come to understand new things under existing concepts, and learn new concepts, and thus learn new possibilities of meaning. Thus we learn from each other’s experience as well as from our own, about betrayal, loyalty, friendship, corruption, power, cruelty, loss. We learn the significance of something, to us, perhaps to humanity, but not necessarily in a way that can comfortably fit into what Murdoch calls the “choice and argument” model: we do not, for example, elicit a principle that may come in useful if we find ourselves in a tricky situation; we do not find reasons being shown to be adequate to situations of the kind, but, if in literature we can see reasons acted on, we may learn that what counts as a reason for someone is an expression of what makes them the person they are.<sup>385</sup> We may learn that that could not be a reason for us, and that may help us to know ourselves. Literature portrays people as having inner depths that reach beyond themselves and the present moment, displaying humanity more revealingly, and that is why Murdoch regards it as important to moral philosophers.

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## 2.2.THE CURRENT VIEW AS ONE MORAL STANCE AMONGST OTHERS

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The model of the current view is, in her view, in part a reaction against interiority, because that has been and continues to be philosophically problematic – what is overt is knowable

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<sup>384</sup> Cora Diamond, “We Are Perpetually Moralists” in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, eds M. Antonaccio and W. Schweiker (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996), 95.

<sup>385</sup> This point is made by Lars Hertzberg, commenting on Peter Winch, in “Philosophy as the Art of Disagreement” In: *From ontos verlag: Publications of the Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society - New Series (Volumes 1-18)* <<http://wab.uib.no/agora-ontos/>>. Republication by the Wittgenstein Archives at the University of Bergen, 2013. Original publication in: *Publications of the Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society – New Series Vol. 10* (2009). John Edelman (Ed.): *Sense and Reality. Essays out of Swansea*. Heusenstamm: ontos verlag.  
<http://web.abo.fi/fak/hf/filosofi/Staff/lhertzbe/Text/disagreement.pdf> (accessed 05/08/2014).

and tractable, subject to recognised methods of investigation, whereas our inner experiences are private and elude description and verification, and are tainted by association with unruly emotion. It is partly the expression of a desire to bring phenomena, and people, into order, to penetrate what we do not understand – inaccessibility, uniqueness, ambiguity and unknowability threaten order; and partly an expression of Liberal values – individualistic, rationalistic, libertarian – an expression of understandable desires to avoid moralism, judgmentalism, barbarism – but which, clearly, are themselves values (which, once admitted, can be accepted or not, in whole or in part, and their compatibility with other views tested, the significance of that considered, rather than dictating the current view as the only possible stance to embody such aspirations).

Regarding the first, the reaction against interiority, the alternative view taken by Murdoch by contrast may, wrongly, be thought to appeal to “metaphysical entities”, although, with the distinction she makes between two senses of the inner noted above, she shows that this is not so. The ideas of unspoken thoughts, mental images, need not imply any privileged knowledge, and “depend almost entirely on overt criteria”<sup>386</sup> – we are interested in people’s experience, and it is a fact that people talk about their thoughts, feelings and so on, but that does not require us to reify things we cannot see, or pretend that they are really talking about things outside the person that they and we can see. Nevertheless, it does not follow that we are transparent to each other or even to ourselves, as she says, “There are situations which are obscure and people who are incomprehensible, and the moral agent, as well as the artist, may find himself unable to describe something which in some sense he apprehends.”<sup>387</sup> Her point is that the desire to eschew metaphysics is itself an expression of a certain moral outlook, a resistance to the idea that some things may be beyond our comprehension, either because we have much to learn, or because there are things we cannot know.

Regarding the second, the need to understand, her view makes reflection on morality more a matter of interpretation than logic, and that may be felt to make it less predictable, certain, amenable to comprehensive organization, universalizable, precise. All of that is true, but not in a way that need be felt to threaten what is valued by adherents of the analytical approach, or not all of it. That said, it requires a recognition of, and acceptance of, the fact that we are not all in the same place and also the possibility that we may not understand everything. Language, since it is a medium of expression, “has limitations and there are moments when, if it is to serve us, it has to be used creatively, and the effort may fail.”<sup>388</sup> Language does not

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<sup>386</sup> Murdoch, “Vision and Choice”, 37.

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*

anticipate events; language does not circumscribe possible experience. Language is our resource for communicating, within its limitations and ours, our experience. Once again, the aspiration to a certain conception of precision and objectivity is the expression of a moral outlook.

With regard to the third point, the Liberal attitude, it may be felt that in declaring a moral view, rather than being neutral, Murdoch's alternative goes against the Liberal and Protestant ideals underlying the current view, of dispassionate undogmatic reasonableness and respect for other people's values and viewpoints. It may be felt that to be committed in one way rather than another is to reject alternatives as wrong, and this may be seen as departing from the philosophical, academic, ideal of critical detachment, and to imply that a neutral rationality endorses the view taken. It may be thought that philosophers ought to remain above all positions rather than subscribing to a particular one, and that doing so can only expose them to criticism in debates that will be interminable because they arise from fundamental differences of value, which are ultimately unamenable to rational argument. However, it is Murdoch's point that this is not how things are, and this does not mean that she thinks Liberal values are demonstrably wrong according to neutral criteria. Rather she is making them explicit, and showing how they influence the model, which is, therefore, not itself value-neutral. She is also pointing out that holding this viewpoint causes people to neglect important phenomena – those at any rate that she regards as important, and invites readers to consider to make their own assessment. So they are not in fact above debate, but in it, as she is, and speaking from a particular position. There is no need to suppose philosophical debate can achieve nothing; there is no need to be depressed if it does not result in consensus; that is not what it is for. She wants to show that we have resources for serious, sensible discussion, but that these are not confined to logic, and the object of such discussion is not to establish the right answer. She portrays the model's proponents as “people whose fundamental moral belief is that we all live in the same empiricist and rationally comprehensible world and that morality is the adoption of universal and openly defensible rules of conduct.” Those who take the other view she has tried to describe, “are people whose fundamental belief is that we live in a world whose mystery transcends us and that morality is the exploration of that mystery in so far as it concerns each individual.”<sup>389</sup> Which view one takes depends much on personal history, temperament and other particularities, but these features are part of rational debate and not inaccessible and immovable points of anchorage outside debate: these will contribute to one's understanding, and it is a legitimate part of moral discussion that one explore one's own current anchorage

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<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

points and consider whether and to what extent one can or will move away from them to a new position, a starting point for next time. It is the “infinitely perfectible”<sup>390</sup> activity of philosophy to explore, develop and extend one’s understanding, and it is an essential part of it that each person plough their own furrow, starting from where they are and going where the argument takes them; they cannot delegate the task of finding out the answers and then simply act on the answers.<sup>391</sup>

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### 2.3. MURDOCH ON NATURALISM

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She makes some brief but interesting points about naturalism, taken to be the erroneous drawing of evaluative conclusions from factual premises, and the erroneous defining of moral terms in non-moral terms. Philosophers seeking to avoid these supposed errors have as she sees it been attracted to the current view because it eschews metaphysics and aspires to the strictly rational and empirical. She argues that from her alternative viewpoint, the argument looks rather different. It can be a good thing to expose suppressed evaluative premises because then moral assumptions are made explicit which it may be revealing to examine. When this is done the arguer may commit to the premise, making the argument valid, although now dependent on a premise which, because of its evaluative nature, may be thought to be unamenable to proof, and so the argument may continue. Or the exposed premise may be such that nobody wants to disagree with it. The fact, then, that the conclusion rests on a premise that is not deductively proved may not undermine the argument. On the other hand, the hearer may see that there is after all no pressure to concede the point. Murdoch does not consider the logic of such arguments especially problematic. What is really of moral interest in them is their supposedly evaluative premises, which are expressions of a moral view and which when exposed we may readily accept or reject or may need to consider at length. Cora Diamond comments on this that Murdoch, like Stanley Cavell,<sup>392</sup> wants also to reveal here that in arguing in this way someone may be making an assumption about the truth of the missing premise, or the assent to it of the hearer (which may be oneself), and this is itself a moral act – this may be done without realizing it, or to secure assent, or to evade the implications. If that is accepted, then moral rationality involves more than assessing the logical validity of an argument. It also involves being sensitive to

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<sup>390</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 23.

<sup>391</sup> This is a point made by Rai Gaita often in his writing, in many ways, but see for example, “Individuality”, chapter 9 of *Good and Evil: an absolute conception*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford, Routledge, 2004), 141-163. My point here is that, as Gaita puts it on p.142, morally, each person is called upon to “rise to what we are called to become”, and that is perpetual, and not something that one can delegate.

<sup>392</sup> Diamond is referring particularly to Cavell’s remarks on moral rationality in ch.12 of *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1979).

what we are doing in arguing, and in arguing in the way that we do, and having available to us such critical categories as “evasion” and “responsibility” as “terms of evaluation in thinking which are as much moral as cognitive.”<sup>393</sup> The phenomena of morality do not necessarily find, or need, expression by means of a specialist vocabulary.

Murdoch regards it as more important to contest the claim that moral terms cannot be defined in non-moral terms. She has argued that moral concepts are not bipartite items containing separable factual and evaluative components, from which the evaluative component can be removed without altering the facts. Rather, concepts are the media through which moral visions are communicated, such that to use other terms is to give a different description of reality. On this view “fact and value merge in a quite innocuous way”<sup>394</sup> and so “the prohibition on defining value in terms of fact loses much of its point.”<sup>395</sup> This is not an outright rejection of any distinction between fact and value, if one could make sense of that; these are two distinct and useful concepts. Rather, as Cora Diamond argues, Murdoch is realigning the distinction.

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#### 2.4. CORA DIAMOND ON MURDOCH ON FACT AND VALUE

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Murdoch’s idea of consciousness as morally coloured makes the prevailing conception of the distinction between fact and value, as manifest in arguments about the nature of moral argument and the defining of moral words, seem to give a false picture of our relation to the world and the nature of our awareness. She presents a new conception of that distinction which reflects a different conception of moral rationality.

Cora Diamond develops an argument of Murdoch’s to this effect which she finds in “*Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*.”<sup>396</sup> There Murdoch primarily addresses Kant, although the argument applies to any philosophers who like him see the human cognitive capacity as the capacity to make true or false judgments about the world. This involves the idea that in judging what is the case our nature as moral beings is not active. Murdoch, as explained, sees our nature as moral beings as perpetually engaged. As she sees it, the Kantian separation of fact and value does not give a realistic representation of the way in which we are aware of the world. If thought is perpetually moral then morality is not a department of thought, as that view, and its continuing presence in analytical philosophy, makes it. That

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<sup>393</sup> Diamond, “We Are Perpetually Moralists”, 82.

<sup>394</sup> Murdoch, “Vision and Choice”, 54.

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>396</sup> Cora Diamond, “We Are Perpetually Moralists”, 103, in which she refers to Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a guide to morals* (London, Penguin Books, 1992), 221-3.

view directs attention away from individual awareness and towards choice in a world available to transparent cognition, and that is not how things are.

Diamond presents an argument in two stages to show how Murdoch applies a different conception of the distinction between fact and value. The first stage invites us to consider the nature of history-writing. There are within the discipline certain ways of justifying claims about what is the case or justifying explanations of events, actions and other phenomena. There are practices of presenting evidence and showing how it supports or fails to support claims or conjectures; of acknowledging and countering objections; ways of establishing facts, or of justifying an interpretation of the evidence. Other subjects have their methodologies too. Clearly these are not immutable, but evolve with the subject; there can be problems and puzzlements within a discipline about how to proceed, whether it is better to do a thing in one way rather than another.

For the argument what matters is that there are subject matters with practices or methods for coming to a representation of some aspect of the world. Murdoch does not see morality as a subject amongst these. It is not a topic, with practices for establishing facts about an aspect of the world. Since, as Diamond puts Murdoch's view, "cognitive awareness is ubiquitously value-laden", value "is not the object of some branch of thought or discourse."<sup>397</sup> Moral value is not the object of cognitive activity in the way in which historical understanding is: we cannot stand outside moral and other value, and survey it as if it were an aspect of the world or of human life which could be intelligibly partitioned off from other aspects, and bring methods to bear to arrive at a view of some facts about, say, moral behaviour. Doing that would be doing social science.<sup>398</sup> Moral and other value is in the activity of thought by which facts in subject matters are established. Diamond infers, "if morals are ubiquitous, they are not facts."<sup>399</sup> It might be better to say that value gives form to enquiry, rather than being an object of enquiry.

The second stage of the argument considers the implications of the metaphor of vision involved in Murdoch's view. Diamond contrasts two ideas that may be implicit in the notion of seeing. Firstly, there is the way of seeing of the mushroom-fancier or the rock-climber. Each of those, intent on their particular activity, sees what is salient to their needs and

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<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>398</sup> It can be asked to what extent social science can be conducted on the model of the natural sciences, and to what extent the investigator must share in the perspective, and the values, of the subjects of study, as Peter Winch does in *The Idea of a Social Science* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), but I cannot pursue that here.

<sup>399</sup> Cora Diamond, "We Are Perpetually Moralists", 107.

purposes, but may not notice other things. The mushroom fancier notices flecks of white amongst the leaf litter, anything that might be a mushroom, but misses the beauty of the autumn woods; the rock climber sees every crevice that might be a handhold or foothold, but misses the blue of the veronica growing there. This is not, according to Diamond, what Murdoch has in mind in her use of the metaphor of seeing the world in a morally coloured way. The second idea is that moral seeing is modelled on “the taking in of the visual world with a kind of wonder and freshness of perception, a visual attention which can simply marvel at a shade of blue or at the twistedness of a tree trunk, which can take in the goodness and beauty of the world, then we do indeed have a model of moral awareness of reality.”<sup>400</sup> This might be apparent in someone’s stopping for a moment and saying, with a sigh, ‘Just look at those bluebells’, or ‘just look at that tree trunk’ but it need not be remarked on; what is of interest is the fact of continuous inward unspoken, and not even necessarily registered, response. Whether given outward expression or not, the nature of someone’s response to reality is constitutive of experience. This reference to visual awareness is for Murdoch a model of moral awareness in that it is a response to reality that is not a recording on transparent film of all light reflected from objects within its range, but, so to speak, is the world impressing itself on a reactive medium, a human being.

The conclusion Diamond takes from this is that the distinction between fact and value is redrawn. If value is perpetually present in thought, then our experience of the world can in principle have moral implications for any situation; it “can shape our vision of what the situation is.”<sup>401</sup> She continues, “a fundamental form of moral rationality is the interpretation of something or other into practical life”. That is a difficult form of words, but my (necessarily provisional) interpretation is that what we see or experience, whether thing, person, situation, story, principle, etc. – what has entered into a person’s consciousness, into thought, what has been noticed, registered, or understood, in some way – can at any time be a means, a resource, for us to interpret something else that we experience: we can say, ‘such and such idea is relevant here’, ‘this situation is like that situation’, ‘here is a case of that principle’, ‘That person/action is like another’, ‘Perhaps y applies here’, ‘Now I see why she said/they say...’, ‘Now I know the meaning of x’, ‘This is like nothing I’ve seen before’, and so on, with endless possibility – thus we interpret into practical life, potentially manifest in word or deed, something seen, thought or experienced. This is a fundamental form of moral rationality in that we make sense of the world by making connections in thought between things in our experience, and the result of our mental effort, which finds expression in words, is subject to critical appraisal – perhaps this is not like that in the relevant way,

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<sup>400</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>401</sup> *Ibid.*

perhaps it is but that is not the important thing, perhaps there are more apt forms of expression, and so on. We bring experiences to bear upon each other, and in so doing, we do not merely assign the present experience to pre-existing fixed categories but extend and reshape the categories, or invent new ones, as demanded by the new experience, and we thus expand the depth and breadth of our concepts which are our tools for understanding and sharing our understanding. This is the work of an individual mind, uniquely placed, and hence the possibility both of mutual understanding and misunderstanding.

### 3. THE IMPLICATIONS FOR PRICHARD AND MORAL RATIONALISM

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Prichard thought moral philosophy rested on a mistake. He diagnosed the mistake as that of thinking that argument could clinch either that obligations exist or that any moral claim is true or that any moral action is right or that anybody ought to act in a certain way. He did not deny the possibility of moral thinking, moral deliberation even, but he opposed the idea that such thinking followed standard logical forms, that it could by overt uncontentious steps lead to a conclusion that rational persons would be compelled to accept according to an explicit agreed uncontroversial canon of rationality. He accepted those forms as correct, but realized that they did not fit the kind of thinking that occurs in matters of value. It did not, evidently, occur to him to question the conception of rational thinking that of its nature excluded from legitimacy the way we think about value. He said little positively about what moral thinking was like except that it was the working out of a “complete”<sup>402</sup> description of action, which, when achieved, would encapsulate the moral nature of the action. That is entirely compatible with Murdoch’s elaboration of the idea of attending to reality and her use of the metaphor of vision – Prichard after all was an intuitionist because he thought that in the absence of argument we had to ‘see’ the truth of the moral descriptions that we arrive at. In fact his favoured word was “grasp”, which avoids the visual metaphor for one which perhaps presents less temptation to reify its objects, since, although metaphorical, grasping is more akin to understanding than to seeing, and we are less likely to be tempted to suppose it refers to any literal getting hold of one definite object by another definite object. I am not sure that he could be said to have subscribed to moral realism, in spite of being a ‘non-naturalist intuitionist’.<sup>403</sup> Intuitionism seems to be a position rather by default,<sup>404</sup> by the *via*

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<sup>402</sup> Prichard, *Moral Writings*, 13.

<sup>403</sup> I can’t argue this possibly controversial view here, but it seems to me that an intuitionist need not take a position on the issue of moral realism – the view seems to be the denial that moral utterances are logically demonstrable combined with the assertion that they can be known, and true, without any particular commitment as to what warrants our calling them true.



*negativa* of denying the alternative attempts to establish that we know the truth of moral claims whilst holding to the idea that we do know, so there need be no implication of moral entities presupposed by his version of the view any more than by Murdoch's view when she uses the metaphor of vision. She does not enter into that debate and is happy both to express support for Moore in taking "goodness to be a real constituent of the world"<sup>405</sup> and to accept that the existence of "[metaphysical] entities cannot be established", while at the same time making it clear that she does not take language about what is beyond the empirical or logical to be meaningless. Indeed, her work may be seen as the working out of ways to make sense of, speak meaningfully about, that in human experience which defies the literal. Prichard talked about the way we *describe* the moral situation – allowing for the possibility of misdescription, and for the possibility, the need, of thinking towards an apt description. This itself resembles Murdoch's idea of the task of coming to understand a person, a situation;<sup>406</sup> and also, her claim that moral differences can be conceptual differences.<sup>407</sup> For (part of?) the task of arriving at an apt description is that of attending to reality, and conceptualizing one's situation – trying to interpret one's concepts into practical life.

One thing that gets in the way of Prichard's progress is his accepting as "argument" the model of the recognized valid forms of inference. The absence of anything that looks like that in moral discussion, or its problematic apparently illicit presence, if that conception of argument is accepted, as Prichard argued occurs in consequentialism,<sup>408</sup> constitutes a pressure towards anti-rationalism. Cavell argued that it is mere dogma that we cannot derive obligations from premises which do not mention obligations, and says the view is "empty in a way that the heart of ordinary language has the reasons for".<sup>409</sup> He concedes we do not reason deductively or inductively in that way, but contests the notion of rationality that declines to acknowledge that well-founded conclusions can be reached in any other way, and that only recognizes as legitimate candidates for truth statements which are conclusions from some process of reasoning. Rather than rejecting forms of argument that do not conform to the standards, one could work back from actual observed ways of arguing and forming beliefs and understandings, from the ways we support, work towards, accept and reject

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<sup>404</sup> It seems to me that non-naturalism, at least in Prichard, may be confined to a rejection of the fact-value distinction as traditionally conceived and which Murdoch also rejects. I think Prichard could have accepted Murdoch's points on this.

<sup>405</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 3.

<sup>406</sup> As in the discussion of M's coming to understand D in "The Idea of Perfection" in *The Sovereignty of Good*, 17ff.

<sup>407</sup> Murdoch, "Vision and Choice", *passim*.

<sup>408</sup> Prichard, *Moral Writings*, 9.

<sup>409</sup> Cavell, S. *The Claim of Reason*, Pt 3, ch XII, p.315.

claims in practice, to the suspicion, at least, that these forms do not constitute an exhaustive representation of successful forms of practical reasoning.

Taking Murdoch's thoughts to the issue between contemporary moral rationalists and anti-rationalists, how might she have answered the "Why be moral?" question? The question was – why ought one, all things considered, to do what one morally ought to do? Rationalists in effect reword it, so that it becomes 'why ought one rationally to do what one morally ought to do?' I argued that this presupposes separate means of rational adjudication of moral judgments, and that Prichard, in my view rightly, saw that as an erroneous presupposition. One way of answering the question in light of Murdoch's thoughts would be to say, 'It depends who you ask.' That would be to say that there is no single definitive answer, and any answer will itself reflect a moral view rather than being a purely objective view uncorrupted by moral inflection. Both sides of the current debate share the presupposition that there is a neutral correct answer; moral rationalists believe it can be shown that rationality, the correct conception of rationality, will endorse all correct moral judgments. Anti-rationalists share the same conception of rationality, but maintain that it fails to endorse all, and perhaps any, moral judgments. But both think they are answering the question from a neutral standpoint. Rationalists do not see the view that rationality is, say, acting in self-interest, or consistency and impartiality, as itself an expression of a moral outlook, perhaps continuing in what Murdoch described as the Liberal and protestant tradition, which sees human beings as self-directing free agents, choosing without prejudicial influences amongst alternatives that themselves describe reality in a way that competent thinkers must agree upon. Those who regard rationality as confined to self-interest have selected the phenomena in a way that Murdoch argues ignores much of importance of the kind that has been discussed, if too briefly, above. They also distort the phenomena they select, presenting self-interest as itself free of value. Plato's conception of the same world was that it can never compromise one's interests to act morally, but that is to see self-interest in a morally different way. Superson preferred a conception of rationality as consistency and impartiality, but presented a moralized conception of what these require of a person, since nothing is written into those concepts that can determine whom to respect, when, and what action constitutes the respectful course – these are matters of interpretation; Murdoch thought Kant does so too, in her argument against the traditional fact-value distinction.<sup>410</sup>

Anti-rationalists wish to emphasize the element of personal commitment in morality, but can find no place for it within analytical philosophy's conceptions of rationality and find

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<sup>410</sup> As argued in §2.4 above.

themselves forced to deny that acting morally is a matter of rationality, or at least to maintain that sometimes it is rational to override the call of morality. Murdoch is arguing for a conception of rationality that pays attention to the phenomena of thought and moral life. She is heeding Wittgenstein's injunction, "Don't think, but look."<sup>411</sup> Rather than stipulating a conception of rationality driven by certain, so to speak, ideological preconceptions, she looks at how people actually think; of course, there is a need to say whether they are thinking well or badly, but rather than assessing that in terms of adherence to or deviation from a stipulative norm of rationality, chosen rather arbitrarily, or at least, according to value preferences which are not and do not have to be universally accepted, she notes the ways in which we actually criticize the quality of thinking and of action. She observes that we in fact have a variety of critical categories; that these are indefinitely malleable in order to be useful in new, in principle unpredictable and unique circumstances; that these concepts do not map on to a waiting reality but constitutively form the reality of which we speak, subject to criticism. Of course we must also judge when and which concepts are appropriate, and this may require the ascertainment of further facts, itself a task of making judgments about how best to describe things. She is also aware of the consequence of this, that we do not always understand things, we do not always know how to describe them, we do not always understand other people, we can be lost for words.

On the issue of the overridingness of morality, seeing morality as pervasive is a more perspicuous understanding, in my view, of the reason why value is an inextinguishable element of thought, and why therefore, choices and actions are always answerable to morality. If Murdoch is correct that morality is not a subject matter, differentiated by content, then, contrary to the current view, it does not even itself provide a separate set of reasons for action amongst others, to compete for importance alongside them, and which can be set aside, but is, as Stocks said a long time ago, the judge of all our reasons.<sup>412</sup> This is not to make a moralistic point, that everything is a matter of morality, that one is always subject to moral judgment and condemnation, or that we must always be on our guard in case we may be committing some sin unbeknownst. The point is that there is no specification of activity that can identify what is and what is not to be a matter of moral concern, so while there may be matters which we would hardly wish to describe as having moral interest, such as someone's catching the 0717 to Paddington, there is nothing, not even this, which might not be a matter of moral concern in suitable circumstances, which cannot be circumscribed in advance.

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<sup>411</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1958), §66.

<sup>412</sup> J. L. Stocks, "The Limits of Purpose" in *Morality and Purpose*, (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969).

Perhaps I can show this conception of rationality at work by means of an illustration, taking Sophocles' *Antigone*, or some version of it. Antigone puts her life at risk to bury her brother who is in disgrace, having fought against and killed their brother in a civil war in Thebes. To some it may seem irrational because the burial of her brother may seem not to warrant the cost of her own life, it cannot bring him back to life, even her uncle doesn't want to punish her but if she defies him he will have no alternative, what good will come of it? Anyway, Polynices was a rebel who fought his own brother. He deserves his fate. She is taking duty to extremes, for nothing, letting her feelings get the better of her and not being practical. She is being sentimental, wasting her life on a rash, disobedient youth. She's getting things out of proportion.

Antigone sees her brother's burial as morally, perhaps religiously, necessary. Her own and her brother's standing with the gods is more important than their standing with the world; she must do the right thing no matter what the cost. She loves her brother and cannot bear to leave him exposed, abandoned. That he can know nothing of this does not lessen the necessity to bury him. His dead body is not like his discarded sword or the stones on the battlefield. It cannot be left for the crows. If burying him means her death, what is that to her, since if she does not bury him she will not be able to live with herself – life as she knows it, as she can bear it, will be over; she will not be the same person, and she will not be able to respect herself. She could not pretend to herself that she had not failed him. She has, and wants, no other choice. It is perfectly rational to bury him.

Moral judgments, on both sides, inform how rational, or otherwise, Antigone's action is seen to be. The two opinions on the rationality of Antigone's action can co-exist – this does not entail that the opinions are equal, equally right, or equally valid, as it is sometimes put: there is no position from which to make such a judgment. The views are what they are and will be seen to be what they are seen to be, as answerable to considerations such as those illustrated, but neither is obviously internally contradictory. There is nobody we can ask who is right. Creon asked Tiresias but didn't like his answer. There is no need to convince either side that they are wrong, there is no need for consensus, because each sees from a point of view: what would be wanted by one who insisted that agreement must be reached on whether Antigone acts rationally, on whether she does the right thing? What makes each side see things the way they do is an expression of their valuations, and they have come to these out of the lives they have lived and being the people they are and their position in the circumstances in which they find themselves. For this reason, to attempt to change someone's view is to attempt to change them, and it is a moral question in itself how far one can (should) press

such efforts. Not that one may not do so, but equally, not that one ought to do so; and always, how one proposes to do it is a moral matter too. This is not just because it is a good thing to respect the views of others, and to recognize one's own limitations, i.e. that humility and a non-judgmental attitude are good (Liberal, protestant) things. Even where one person thinks that another is dangerously wrong, and may feel a moral responsibility to persuade them otherwise, as perhaps someone may feel about Antigone whose life is under threat, it may, for example, be beyond their powers to bring the other to what they see as a better view, and attempt at persuasion may provoke quite other responses. It can be a sort of insult, expressing contempt for that which the other values. What is achieved, if someone does come to see things differently, as Creon does, too late, is not learning the correct view; it is moving to a different and perhaps they may think better, wider, perspective. That can only be achieved by debate if participants have something to bring to the discussion: words alone are empty without the engagement of a human person in them. Someone may thereby enlarge their vision; that process is essentially ongoing.<sup>413</sup> It sometimes happens that much later, a person mentally revisits what happened, and sees it differently – perhaps they regret that they did not intervene, or that they did, and so on.

The concept of rationality receives attention in the *Gorgias*, where Plato makes a distinction between oratory and genuine philosophy – we could say Plato is making a distinction between emotion and reason, favouring the rational method of philosophy over the pandering to emotion of the Sophists. This is right, but it might be thought of as the familiar distinction between reason and feeling, objectivity and subjectivity, fact and value. In connection with the Antigone story, that might be thought to imply that the characters are being emotional, letting their feelings about Polynices cloud their view, and that we could, if we thought about it rationally, extract a description of the situation purified of such content, and having thus clarified the issues, derive a practical solution to the situation optimal for all sides (maximizing utility, perhaps). But there is a question about how Plato conceives the rational method of philosophy, and clearly it is not in this way. I have tried to describe this in chapter 4, and Murdoch's elaboration of it in this chapter. In a public lecture, Gaita explains it succinctly in this way, "When people say that Socrates appealed to reason whereas the orators appealed to emotion, I want to say that there's no such thing as reason, the only thing there is are ways of thinking well or badly".<sup>414</sup> As I have tried to elaborate by reference to Murdoch, Gaita has in mind that we possess a range of critical concepts, appropriate to their subject matter (clearly he does not mean that we have separate

<sup>413</sup> In "The Idea of Perfection" in *The Sovereignty of Good* Murdoch repeatedly describes this as an "endless task".

<sup>414</sup> From "The Monthly Video", Key Thinkers seminar series, 2009, Melbourne University [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vaoY\\_r-2YE8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vaoY_r-2YE8) (accessed 23/09/14).

collections of categories each appropriate to a specified subject matter) which when deployed aptly present the results of sincere efforts to see a human situation truthfully. This is a point about the scope and limits of rationality, as not necessarily being confined to the appraisal of forms of inference or deliberation directing action, but also, about its being only one of a range of categories for the appraisal of thought and action, and by no means the most important.

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